



紫色の クオリア

うえお久光
イラスト／網島志朗

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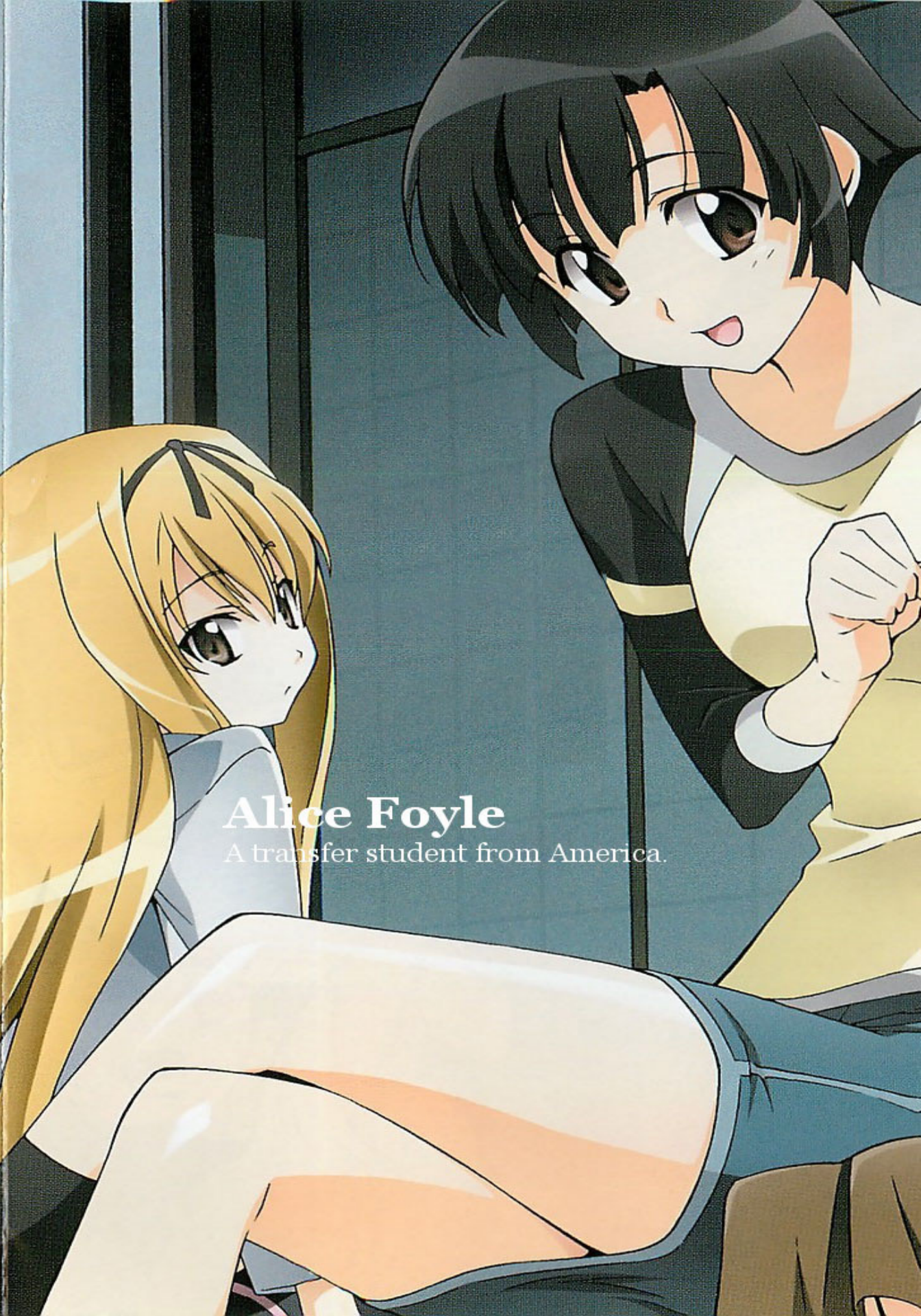
An anime-style illustration featuring two characters. In the foreground, a girl with long, dark purple hair and large, expressive blue eyes stands with her arms crossed. She is wearing a light green long-sleeved dress with a blue and white striped hem. To her left, a boy with short black hair and a white cap is shown in a dynamic pose, looking down with a determined expression. He is wearing a light green jacket over a white shirt. The background is a dark blue sky with white clouds. A large, flowing yellow ribbon or streamer is visible on the right side of the image.

Tenjou Nanami

A girl who considers Yukari her mortal enemy.

Kasoku Tomonori

A classmate who's not too exciting, but...



Alice Foyle

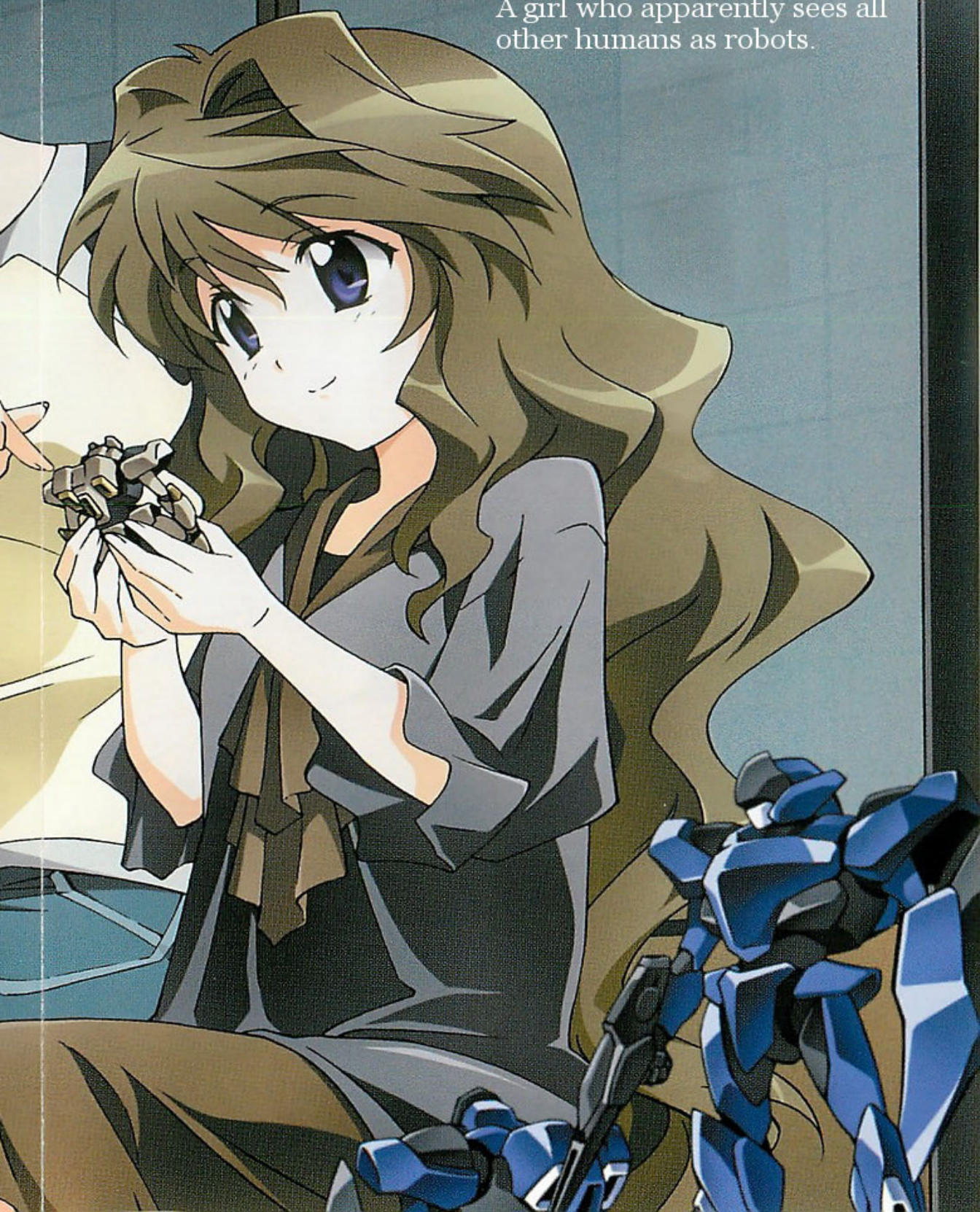
A transfer student from America.

Hatou Manabu

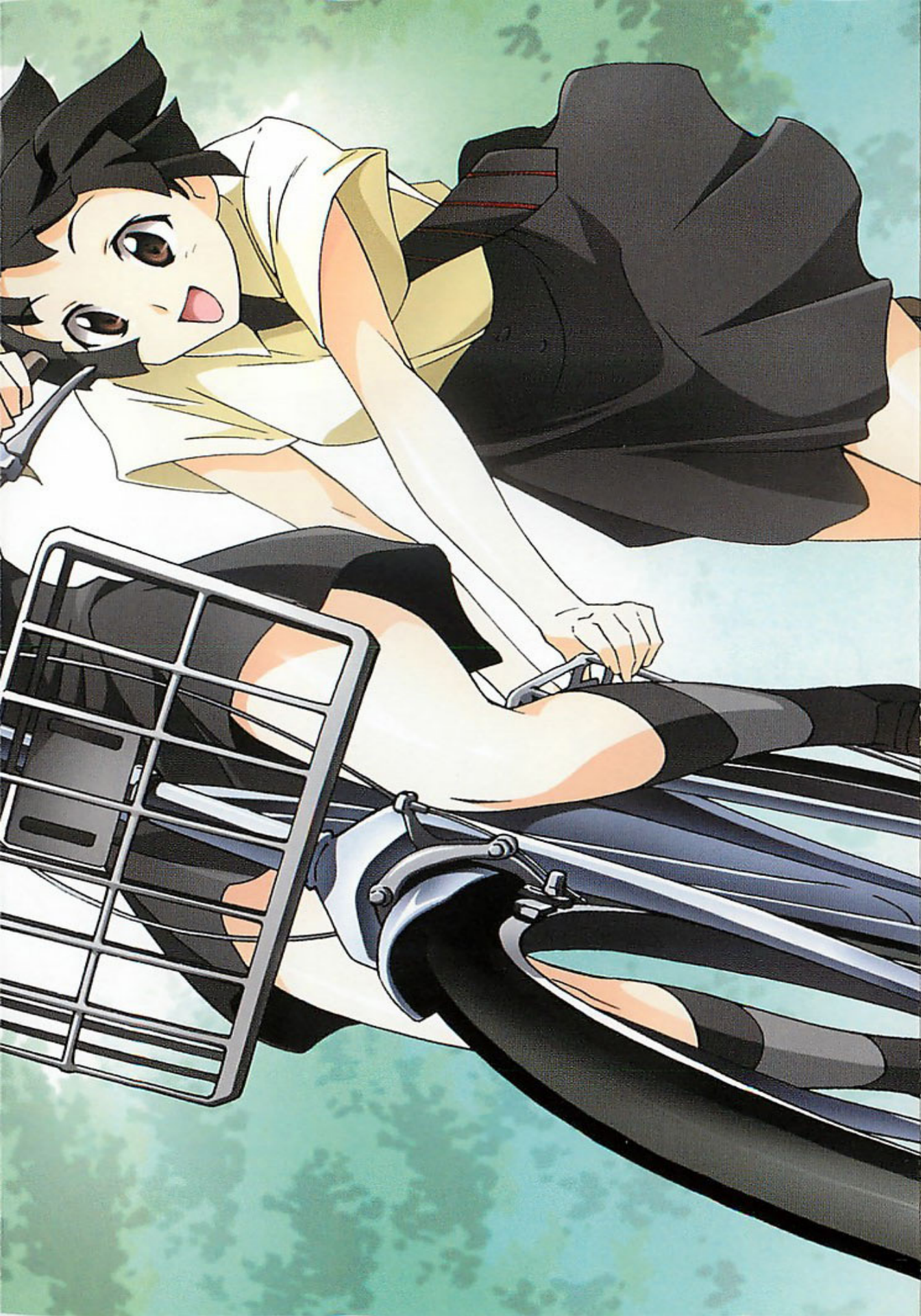
Yukari's classmate and friend.

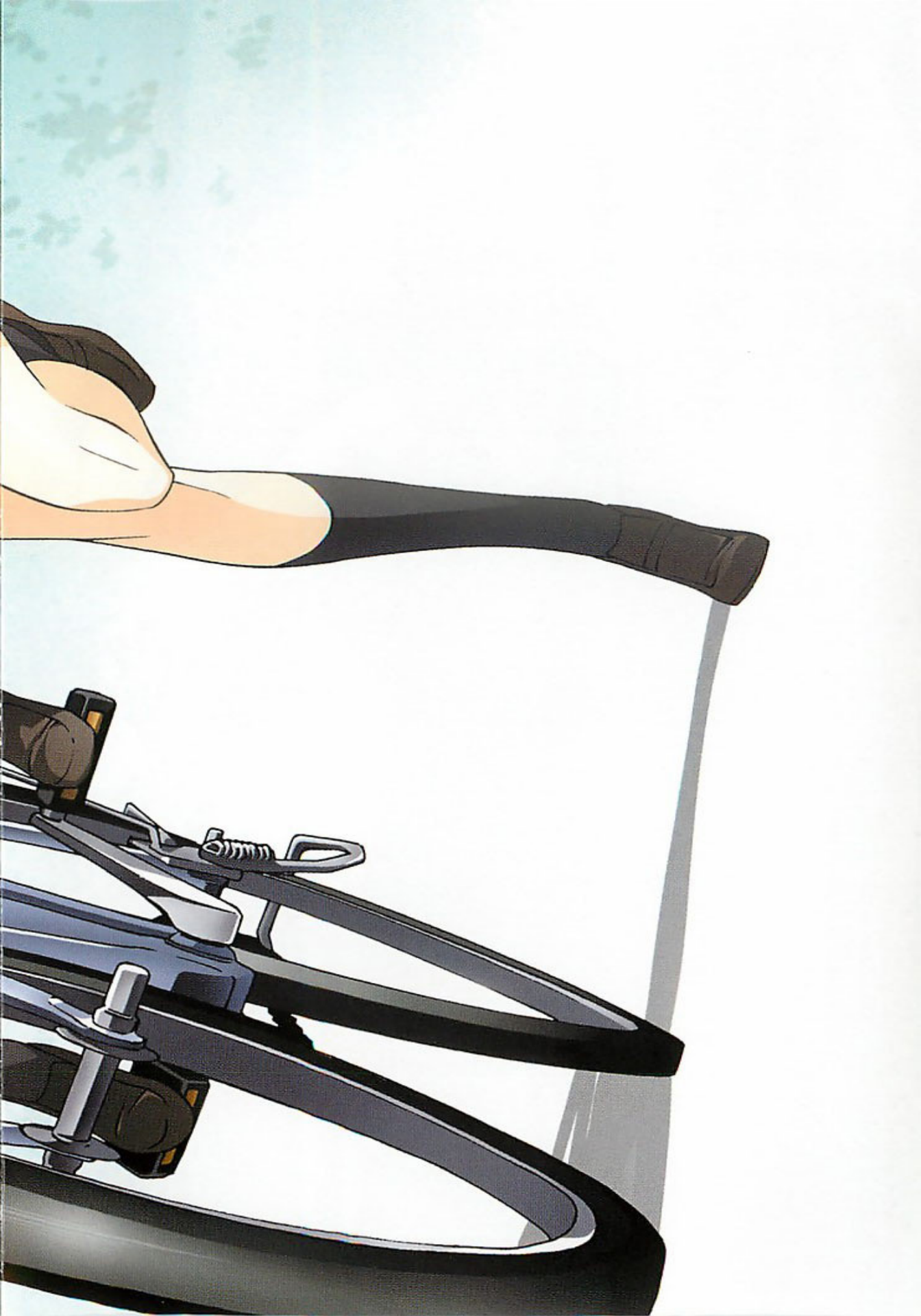
Marii Yukari

A girl who apparently sees all other humans as robots.











It was said that Marii Yukari saw humans as robots.

To be precise, it wasn't just humans; she saw all other living things as robots.

She claimed that she saw all other living things as robots, and there was no way for anybody else to confirm her statement. But no matter how impossible it may sound... perhaps it was worth considering. After all, when we see an apple and perceive that it's "red," exactly how do we communicate that to other people? Is there really any way to describe "redness" other than to say that something is "red"? No matter what words we try to use, it is impossible to precisely express what we mean by "red," and her claim that people looked like robots worked the same way. It was impossible to prove.

Therefore, when asked to explain herself to others, Marii Yukari couldn't say anything but the following:

"I can't really prove it to you, but living things look like robots to me."

As she couldn't really make other people see what she saw, Yukari couldn't explain *that part* of herself at all. So the huge premise here was that we had no choice but to believe her. If you wanted to become acquainted with her, or even be her friend, then you had to accept *that part* of her. No matter how hard it was to believe, you had to take her at her word, unconditionally.



However, I feel that friendship in general means you have to deal with one or two things like this, big or small.

“Hey, Gaku-chan... sorry if I’m wrong, but this thing is yours, right?”

“... Yukari. If I’ve told you once I’ve told you a million times, I don’t have any screws.”

“Wah~. Really... humans are pretty incredible.”

“..... Yeah, sure.....”

If we didn’t accept these things, nothing could move forward.



Marii Yukari was really cute.

All in all she was pretty petite (if she stretched her back, her forehead wouldn't reach farther than my jaw, and I was of average height), and she gave off the impression of a small animal, perhaps because of her natural weave. Her curvy hair gently expanded to fill the space around her head and, in the right light, sparkled like waves on the ocean.

Her hair wasn't the only charming thing about her.

Yukari also had fair facial features.

She might have said that other people looked like robots to her, but to me she looked like a doll. Not one of those dolls you could pick up in a shop, but more like a custom-made bisque doll. And when I say doll, I mean only that her features were fair; I don't mean that she lacked emotion. If anything, she was more expressive than anybody else I knew, and I never tired of watching her face going from one emotion to the next completely different one in just a short stretch of time. Her appeal was admittedly more of a childish appeal than a feminine one, but that shouldn't be surprising considering we were still in junior high. And honestly, for someone like me who didn't smile very much and was often was told that "grumpy" seemed to be my default look, her expressiveness sometimes made me jealous.

However, to someone with special eyes like hers, the grass seemed to be greener on the other side of the hill.



“Gaku-chan, you keep saying that, but I kinda would rather be more like you, I think. Your face never really moves very much and you look like you’d be fine if there was something radioactive nearby...”

“If someone else had said that, I might’ve actually been offended...”

“Wah. Umm, no, that’s not what... umm, you’re not getting me right. That’s... umm... I mean...”

I felt my chest tighten and stifled a sigh as I watched her go “wah wah wah” while looking around for someone to save her.

She had such rare, exquisite features that you could go ask ten people to each call ten friends and then all hundred people would probably rant and rave about how cute she was. But for some reason the person herself was surprisingly ignorant of her own cuteness.

She wasn’t being humble or hard on herself; she just literally did not understand that she was cute.

After all, looking through her eyes, there was nobody to compare her own cuteness with.

Since she saw everyone else as robots, Yukari’s idea of what a “proper human” looked like only came from looking at herself in the mirror and from drawings of humans (it seemed that no matter how detailed the drawing, artwork of humans still looked human to her. On the other hand, if you took a photo of a human, it would look like a robot to her no matter how blurry the photo). One’s sense of beauty is born from one’s environment together with one’s experiences, and then is developed through learning. And so, just like how the standards of beauty now are completely different from those in the Heian Period¹, Yukari’s standard of beauty was completely different from our own. Even though we all thought she was cute, to her this just made her feel more isolated. She had been raised surrounded on all sides by robots, and so this just drove home the fact that she was the only person with wavy hair and fair skin.

She really didn’t think of herself as cute, but instead wished she could become a robot like everyone else.

1 794 to 1185 A.D.



But that was precisely why...
“Wah. Gaku-chan?”

That was precisely why whenever I found a chance (for example, when we were alone), I would give her a tight hug. Remember, I was the always-grumpy girl, so this was pretty out of character and embarrassing for me. But as long as I couldn't tell her these things out loud, as long as I couldn't express these feelings to her, I would never be able to convey what my eyes were seeing to her. But even if I couldn't get that across, I still wanted her to understand.

That's why as long as we were not in a public place, even if it was embarrassing, I would tell her whenever I found a chance to.

“I think you're really cute. No matter what you might think, at the very least I can say that you look really cute to me.”

“Wah. That's kinda embarrassing.”

Yukari looked down and I saw a tinge of red in her cheeks. I'd like to think that there was a bit of happiness mixed in with her embarrassment, but I was sure that what I wanted to say didn't get across. She couldn't understand.

So I wouldn't just tell her. I would hug her too, and pray.

Please, please understand my feelings right now.

Please, please have a bit more confidence in yourself.

Yukari, you could definitely give the cutest person in the world a run for her money. What can I say to make you believe that?

By the way, she seemed to have given up on her personal appearance and never really paid attention to what she wore. Well, to be precise, when she *did* pay attention to it she ended up wearing some absurd things that looked like robot cosplay. But, for all she didn't care about clothes, she did pay a lot of attention to cleanliness.

That makes it especially ironic that she was bad when it came to taking baths. She would never get into the bathtub alone, and so when there wasn't anybody around in her house to help her out she would just end up taking a shower.



It seemed that she just couldn't believe the human body could float, and didn't have any confidence in her own body being waterproof. She would end up thinking about water leaking into her everywhere and get too frightened to take a bath alone.

"Why's everyone else not scared of water? I mean, you look pretty heavy too, and... umm, wah, that's not what I meant. Umm, are you angry? It's... umm..."

It's not like I was really angry (I mean, it's been how long since I've known Yukari?), but seeing her head dart back and forth in slight panic like that reminded me so much of a cute, small animal that I couldn't help but stare. The curt look in my eyes probably came off looking like a glare to her too... it's not like I meant to, but before I knew it my eyes were just glued to her.

"Umm, that's really not what I meant. I'm not saying you're heavy or anything, but it's just that it looks that way to me, and... wah, no, you don't look heavy either. Umm... wah, what do I do..."

She was so cute when she got like this that I was almost tempted to try to feed her breadcrumbs from my palm. I just couldn't keep my eyes off her.

And then I thought... Yukari was so cute like this that maybe it was fine if I didn't try to force her to understand.



When I pulled Marii Yukari into a tight hug from behind, the smell of shampoo and soap rose to meet my nostrils.

That smell was a symbol of her own cleanliness, and of course cleanliness was next to godliness, but underneath it also showed that she was so unconfident in her own looks that she wanted to at least be clean to make up for it. Knowing these sad feelings of hers, I had to push down the emotions that threatened to well up out of my chest, and so I often just buried my head into her hair instead... right into the nape of her neck. I searched for her own scent, underneath all these layers of "cleanliness." I wanted to know the real her. When I did this, I would often feel embarrassed after I came back down to planet Earth and realized what I was doing to a fellow girl. After going home I would toss and turn in bed, cringing in self-loathing. Despite all that, almost every day I would end up pulling her into a hug and whispering into her ear. *"Yukari, you're really, really cute,"* I would whisper.

She would fidget around a bit when I did that, but after a bit she would turn towards me and hug me right back.

She must've thought that when you were praised, it was your duty to praise that person back.

In the beginning, when I told her she was cute she would always tell me I was cute too.



Unfortunately, unlike normal people, she saw everyone else as robots, so when she called me “cute” it felt a bit... off. Even if she meant it as a compliment, normal girls don’t really know what to think when they’re told they “look pretty strong and sturdy!” or “have a lot of cool extra gadgets!” When she told me “You look like you were designed to be one of those super robots!” I’d have no idea what she meant, even if I could tell she was trying to pay me a compliment. “A-Ahh... t-thanks?” was all I could really clumsily muster up in return. Eventually, she had gone through this awkward experience so many times that she finally stopped returning my compliments, but just hugged me back instead.

Honestly, hugs were pretty embarrassing, but I was pretty grateful she chose to go that route.

Not only did I not really know how to respond to her compliments (what exactly did it mean to be “designed to be one of those super robots” anyways?), but honestly, just complimenting each other like that felt like a rather empty pleasantry to me and I wasn’t particularly fond of that kind of thing. I felt a strange sense of duty to mention her cuteness to her at least once a day (well, I really did think she was cute, so this wasn’t a problem), but it’s not like I was such an important person that my compliments should carry much weight. So I’d end up getting embarrassed and fretting over how out of character this was for me. I mean, it’s not like I was ugly, but my looks were average at best. So when a cute girl like Yukari told me I was cute, the compliment just rang hollow. Rather than engage in this sad exchange of compliments, I much preferred for us to share each other’s embrace, no matter how embarrassing it was. I also had a feeling that my actions spoke more clearly than my words could... that might’ve just been a feeling, though.

When I hugged Yukari with my entire body, I was greeted by a soft, warm sensation and surrounded by her pleasant scent. It made me thankful that I was born a girl.

If we were opposite genders, then we wouldn’t be able to casually do stuff like this. If we were both boys... then yeah, I don’t think this would be possible either. I put the special right given to our gender to good use and hugged her tight. I also began to wonder if she felt the same way I did right now. Did she also find me soft? Find me warm?



She saw me as a robot (apparently, a “super robot”?).

Did that mean that I didn’t only *look* like a robot, but that I also *felt* like one to her?

I saw Yukari as a girl, and when I was hugging her I felt like I was hugging a girl.

But to Yukari, I looked like a robot.

In other words, to Yukari, perhaps the person hugging her did not feel like a soft girl, but just a hard, cold robot.

I asked her about this once, too.

I asked her to describe exactly what I looked like to her, in concrete terms.

Yukari just gave me a sad smile and didn’t answer me, but she did tell me the reason why she couldn’t answer. She told me that during elementary school, she had been asked the same question and back then, she did answer.

And before she knew it, she and that friend had drifted apart from each other.

Another time, Yukari was asked to draw a portrait of a friend in art class. Of course, Yukari ended up drawing a robot, and once her friend saw that drawing, she began to hate and bully Yukari. So, at some point, Yukari began to hide the fact that her view of the world was different from everyone else’s.

I wonder exactly what kind of picture she had drawn.

Had she drawn something that looked completely off?

Or maybe her friend recognized herself even though it was a drawing of a robot. And maybe she was so repulsed by that feeling that she could bring herself to hate a girl even as cute as Yukari.

Yukari begged me.

“Please, please don’t ask me that question,” she begged.



She sounded so cornered when she said that that I just nodded and promised her I would never ask again. Though, Yukari was a pretty careless person at heart, so there were still times I could hear her muttering that I was a “super robot” or had a lot of “extra gadgets” and stuff.

Right now, I was hugging a girl who was very pleasant to the touch.

But did Yukari feel like she was hugging something stiff and strong, something like a super robot with a lot of extra gadgets?

I squeezed her a bit tighter, and she squeezed me right back.

Yes, I was certain now. Hugging beat words by a mile.

I still had no idea what she thought she was hugging, and what she thought was hugging her back, but when we did this I knew that she didn’t find my embrace unpleasant. No matter how I looked to her, she accepted me and even desired my company... I could feel that from this hug.

So, instead of talking, we would just enjoy each other’s embrace.

And I was tempted to think that indeed, my feelings had gotten across.



Marii Yukari's irises were a pretty purple color.

You couldn't tell from very far away, but as soon as you got closer it was obvious. When she looked at you with those clear, light purple eyes, you could feel the muscles in your back tightening, along with the sensation that you were being drawn into those eyes.

So, if you asked people close to her for their impression of her, they would first mention her eyes, not her airy, wavy hair.

Marii Yukari has purple eyes, they would say.

She also seemed to be sensitive to bright lights, and you could sometimes see her wearing tinted glasses or visors.

Those things looked pretty good on her, but to be honest, when her eyes were hidden you couldn't help but feel that something was missing.

I once had the naive idea that maybe those eyes were the reason she saw everyone else as robots, so I asked her.

"Nah," she laughed.

"Purple eyes might be a bit strange, but there are other people with purple eyes too, and they don't see things like I do," she told me.

Well, that was true I suppose.



The problem wasn't in her sense of sight, but in her way of perceiving things, she explained.

Although it was quite rare, there were times when she would grumble about her circumstances.

"Sometimes I just think... I think about why God didn't let me see myself like I see other people. If humans look like robots to me, then my body should look like a robot too... so why am I the only one who doesn't look like one? Maybe I really do look different from a normal human somehow?"

"I don't think so. You look totally normal to me."

"Thanks. So maybe it's not my sense of sight that's weird, but my perception."

She wasn't frightened at all by what she saw through her purple eyes.

What frightened her was what she *couldn't* see.

What frightened her was her own appearance - the fact that she herself didn't look like a "normal" robot.

I couldn't help but ask.

"Yukari, do you like your eyes?"

The question sounded stupid the minute it came out of my mouth, but I couldn't take it back at that point.

So, I just tried to play it cool and continued.

"I like your eyes. They're a really pretty violet. They look really good on you, too."

"Wah. Thanks... I think I like my eyes, too."

Did she really think that, or was she just saying it? We hadn't been friends long enough for me to tell.

All I could do was hope.



Hope that she really did like her own eyes.

When she was born, her parents were probably immediately drawn to the color of her eyes, and they had even named her after them.

Yukari, written with the Japanese character for “purple.”

I really hoped she didn’t hate them – didn’t hate those purple eyes of hers that had become her namesake.

I didn’t really tell her about these feelings of mine, but I did refer to her by her first name and not by Marii, her family name. Yukari, I would call her. It still made me a bit embarrassed to call her that, but I did it anyways.

Because I liked those purple eyes of hers.



“By the way, Gaku-chan, do you like your name?”

“Of course I don’t. If I could go back in time I’d go all the way back to my birth and force them to change it.”

“Wah. Wah. I like your name though...”

My name is Hatou Manabu.

Manabu, as in the Japanese word for “to study,” written with the appropriate Japanese character.

I apologize if there are any other girls named Manabu, but I honestly did not like my name.

After all, Manabu was more of a boy’s name.

I’m not sure who decided that it was a good omen for children to be named by their grandmothers, but one word out of my grandmother’s mouth and Manabu was the name I got stuck with. And since then, because of that name, I had been mistaken for a boy so many times, had been teased so many times. The fact that I always looked grumpy, the fact that I didn’t act like a girl very much at all... it was all definitely because this name had cursed me.

By the way, shortening my name to “Mana” made me sound way too girlish and that became even more embarrassing, so my friends either referred to me by my last name or used the alternate reading of



the Japanese character for Manabu and called me Gaku.

“But you know, I think I wouldn’t have met you if your name wasn’t Manabu.”

“That’s just because you saw that name and were curious whether I was a guy or a girl, right?”

“Wah. No, I always thought you were a girl... I mean, you’re wearing a skirt, right?”

“For some reason that doesn’t make me feel better at all...”

Because Yukari saw others as robots, it was often difficult for her to distinguish between the sexes (although lately she might be improving on that front).

Robots didn’t really have a gender, after all, so she usually judged gender sixty percent based on vocal tone and figure, twenty percent based on name, and the other twenty percent based on clothing (pants for guys, skirts for girls, etc.). Not only was my name Manabu, but my voice was relatively deep and masculine (there were also a lot of guys around us whose voices hadn’t gone through puberty yet), and my figure was relatively gender neutral (okay okay I didn’t really have very formed breasts yet but I’m still growing, leave me alone). So Yukari couldn’t really decide whether I was a girl or not just based on my skirt, and this made her very curious.

She wasn’t satisfied with just checking my gender in the class registry and really wanted to make sure for herself, so she began to follow me around. I never noticed her doing this, and one day we dramatically crashed into each other (if you ignored the fact that she was a girl, this probably counted as my first kiss).

Yes, our first meeting may as well have come out of a manga. Yukari reeled from the shock of our collision and began to cry, but I managed to get her to tell me why she was following me and learned about her purple eyes. After that, I had a slight change of heart and ended up growing out my hair a bit (my hair used to be short and I had decided to change it into a bob, and now some heartless people referred to me as ‘Bobby’). But anyways, one could indeed say that I had met Yukari because of my name.



In that case...

"Well, I've been stuck with this name for fourteen years already, so I guess I've learned to live with it."

"But but, I really want Gaku-chan to like her name too. Because I really, really like it. I really like Gaku-chan's name."

"..... Well, thanks I guess....."

"Umm, so, maybe I should start calling you 'Manabu-chan'?"

"..... That's... uhh, I'd rather not.... Just let me off the hook... just this time, please..."

I pursed my lips and turned my eyes away from her, trying my best to not look at her as she looked up at me with those big, pleading eyes. My cheeks were probably a bit flush right now... I had to do something here and get myself out of this situation...

But.... Manabu..... *chan*?

Hm..... I mean, now it didn't really sound as bad as it did when I was young..... maybe.



You're probably getting a bit tired of hearing it, but Marii Yukari saw other humans as robots.

I happened to find this out by accident, and Yukari generally kept this part of her a secret. She didn't want to cause trouble and have other people think she was weird. She had already gone through similar experiences in her past.

Of course, if all you needed was the will to do something to make it happen, then life would be quite easy indeed. In Yukari's case, her special sight always led her to behave a bit odd, and she was pretty famous not only at our school but also in our town for her strangeness.

I didn't mean that people disliked her, though.

In fact, she was quite well liked.

She was the archetypal "oddball girl" in our class, living in a world of her own, and she was generally favorably received by our classmates. In fact, she had become something like a class mascot.

This was nothing to be surprised about.

She was really cute, after all, and her erratic behavior just served to make her seem even more like a small, harmless animal.



I'm not saying that appearances are everything in this world, but certainly visual information is one of the fundamental sources of information for decision making and was very difficult to ignore. This is exactly why Yukari seeing everyone as a robot had put her through a lot of hardship. At any rate, when people found something cute, they wanted to protect it; that protective behavior was an instinct implanted into us that helped us pass along our genes, and those instincts could be said to be an immutable law of nature. So, the fact that she was well-liked was quite natural, and the fact that I couldn't help but worry about her sometimes was also not very surprising.

But no matter how obvious and logical all this was, there were still strange people in the world who refused to abide by that logic. There were even people who seemed to hold bad grudges against Yukari.

They didn't revel in tormenting her or anything like that, but simply couldn't stand the sight of her and would approach her with hostile intent.

The chief example of this was a girl named Tenjou Nanami.

Tenjou seemed to clash with Yukari at every single opportunity.

Even though she was in a different class, there were times when she would deliberately barge into our classroom during break periods.

She would never resort to direct violence, but she would stand in Yukari's way, or snatch away her notes, or issue childish sounding challenges.

"My my, if it isn't Marii." Unlike me, Tenjou referred to Yukari by her family name, but she said it in such a manner that it was almost like Marii was Yukari's first name. "... So, how is that hidden third eye on your forehead doing?"

"I-I'm not hiding a third eye on my forehead!"

"Oh? Is that so? ... Ah, you only had one in your past life, right? In this life, instead of that third eye, you have an anti-demon seal carved into your hand that you use to fight demons day in and day out, right? How is that doing? Been tingling as of late?"



“..... I don’t have an anti-demon seal or whatever carved into my hand.”

So, let’s admit it, the way she went at Yukari didn’t really amount to “bullying” ... it felt more like two kids fighting, and so everyone else in the class (myself included) felt it would be kinda silly if we tried to interfere. So we just left them be.

Actually, Yukari seemed like she wanted to get closer to Tenjou, so if we tried to step in and didn’t handle things carefully Yukari would probably end up defending Tenjou instead. It was a pretty ridiculous “love” triangle.

So, when Tenjou confronted Yukari, we would all just sit quietly and watch.

However, there was only one time that Yukari lost her temper at Tenjou’s teasing and actually fought back.

It was during one of our lunch breaks when Tenjou said the following:

“Can’t you just go back to where you came from?”

“Where I came from?”

“There’s a Planet Marii somewhere, right? And you’re really a Marii-ite who came from there, right? So shouldn’t you get off the Earth already and just go back? Or are you planning an invasion or somet-”

“I’m from Earth!”

The noisy classroom quieted down instantly at Yukari’s strong reaction.

Marii wasn’t very fond of standing out and would usually shy away from public attention, but this time was different.

She didn’t even seem to be aware that everyone was looking at her as she continued forcefully.



"I-I'm not a 'Marii-ite' or whatever! I was born here on Earth, so I'm definitely from Earth! From Japan!"

"..... I didn't-"

"Just cut it out. Don't go to other people's classrooms just to raise a fuss."

I cut in, and Tenjou shot me an impressively sharp glare. But she didn't say anything more and stomped angrily out of the room.

I chased after her. I just felt something welling up in my chest that I couldn't quash.

I guess it was because I was usually grumpy and couldn't express myself very well, but sometimes when I felt a strong emotion I had a hard time controlling myself. Like now, after I saw a side of Yukari that I almost never saw before.

It's possible that Tenjou realized that I was chasing after her, because I found her waiting for me in a secluded area at the bottom of a flight of stairs.

She spoke before I had a chance to ask her anything.

"You're... Hatou, right? So, did you know? About her *eyes*, I mean."

By the way she asked that, I guessed that Tenjou herself did know.

Well, to be honest I had my suspicions that this had been the case. From the way Tenjou teased Yukari, it felt like she was teasing *that part* of Yukari in particular. So yeah, maybe Tenjou really did know. That Yukari saw everyone else as a robot. That Yukari had never seen anybody else who looked human, who looked "the same."

In that case, Tenjou should be able to understand... she should be able to understand how terribly lonely seeing that every day could be.

When Yukari had argued back at Tenjou, she had never once used the word "human."

She had said she was from Earth... that she was from Japan... but never once did she say that she was human.



She probably just couldn't. Something inside of her head was just breaking hard when she tried.

She could never find anybody else who was "the same," and that was why...

I felt anger rising up inside me again, but at the same time my mind chilled into focus. I nodded slowly at Tenjou's question and answered her.

"Yeah, I know. About how she sees other people... and you know too, don't you? But you still go off and say things like that..."

I stopped talking when I saw an ominous smile on Tenjou's face.

Tenjou looked like she was carefully sizing the situation up as she stared at me. She spoke.

"I did. I've known about her little problem, way more than you... actually, compared to me, you probably don't know about her at all."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Do you want to know? Well, if you want to keep being her friend, it's probably better if you did know."

"What are you..."

But before Tenjou could open her mouth and respond to me, I heard a loud "Gaku-chan!!" from down the hall.

Yukari came running up to us. She had probably realized I wasn't in the classroom anymore.

By the way, my family ran a naginata¹ dojo, and I myself was pretty decent at the naginata (on the flip side, I was pretty bad when it came to mental meditation and things like that, so you could say my hands were faster than my brain).

¹ A naginata is a traditional Japanese weapon, and looks somewhat like a long-sword at the end of a long pole.



So, it was possible that Yukari thought I was going to use physical force to deal with Tenjou here.

Yukari gasped for breath in front of us, while I saw Tenjou's expression twist nastily.

Until that moment, I had thought that Tenjou didn't hate Yukari as much as her words and behavior might imply.

She was just a kid who was too embarrassed to admit her true feelings.

But, as Tenjou looked at Yukari, although I saw a tinge of mournful regret on her face, I also sensed a cool, pale flame that burned in her eyes. The tension in her expression threatened to let loose in fury at any moment, and certainly... no, there was absolutely no questioning it now... she looked like she *hated* Yukari.

At the very least, in that single moment Tenjou sincerely felt hatred for Yukari.

".... U-Umm, Ten-chan....."

Hearing Yukari call out to her, Tenjou gave her a look that was rather difficult to describe, before finally giving a light motion of her head.

Did she just give a little bow? Was she apologizing for what she had said earlier? Either way, that motion only lasted a split second, and soon Tenjou had lifted her head up and was giving Yukari a glare.

"..... I... I will never forgive you. And I will never accept you."

Leaving off with that, Tenjou turned heel and began to walk away.

"Hey, Tenjou!"

I couldn't stifle my anger anymore, but more importantly I really wanted to continue our conversation from moments before. So I tried to stop her.

But Yukari held me back.



“Stop, Gaku-chan... it’s fine. Umm... I guess it’s my fault if Ten-chan hates me anyways... it was something I did before. So it’s fine... please don’t get angry...”

I saw Tenjou begin to turn around for a moment, but then she stopped and just left.

I watched her retreating back before checking with Yukari.

“Yukari, you knew her from before, didn’t you? She knows about your sight, doesn’t she?”

“Yeah. She was... my best...”

“But you aren’t friends anymore.”

“Wah. No, we are! At least, I think we are... I hope Gaku-chan gets along with her too...”

“Absolutely not. Not with her.”

“..... Please don’t say that.....”

I saw Yukari looking up at me with a lonely look in her eyes, so I stroked her head. But then I began to think.

What did Tenjou think I didn’t know about Yukari?

I mean, sure we haven’t known each other for long, and I admit there’s probably still a lot of things about Yukari that I don’t know, but I knew everything I needed to.

Even if there were some parts of her that were a bit different, she was a human just like me, and she was my precious friend.

Tenjou... I don’t know what happened between you and Yukari in the past, but I won’t let your words get to me.

After that day, Tenjou didn’t let up on teasing Yukari.

But, the target of her ire had also expanded to me.

Well, rather, I should say that I began to assertively join in on their spats.



Sometimes, we even butt heads without Yukari present... actually, lately that's what's been happening more often than not.

I'll give her credit for not going around and spreading Yukari's secret, but other than that we really didn't get along.

That was my relationship with Tenjou Nanami.



I'm really really sorry that I have to keep bringing this up over and over again, but Marii Yukari saw other humans as robots.

That might've had something to do with why Yukari loved robots in general, and in her free time she built plastic models.

As long as it was a robot, Yukari wasn't picky... or rather, whether it was a model of a tank or a castle, it seemed Yukari was okay with it as long as it was a plastic model. Actually, it didn't even have to be a model literally made of plastic, apparently.

Yukari lived in a quaint single house with a garden, and in that garden was a small workshop and a storeroom. There were a lot of unfamiliar tools and equipment in the workshop, while the storeroom was filled to the brim with plastic models of robots. The ones that couldn't fit into the storeroom were used to decorate the roof, like gargoyles, or to decorate the lawn like lawn gnomes.

To be precise, though, Yukari enjoyed the process of making these robot models more than she enjoyed seeing the finished product - of course, she did still like robots very much.

Yukari had a little brother and a little sister (their names were Aoi and Akane, and they adored their older sister). Through them, Yukari got plastic models that the elementary schoolers had neither the time, patience, nor skill to build, so she took it upon herself to build them herself.



That was Yukari's favorite way to pass her free time, and it made "Marii Yukari" quite a famous name in the elementary schools, especially for the boys.

And honestly, even girls who weren't interested in plastic models had no choice but to stare in amazement when they saw her building these things.

I was surprised as well when I first saw it with my own eyes.

It was early in our summer break, and I went over to Yukari's place in the morning when I saw over fifty boxes of plastic models piled up in front of her family's workshop. *Wow, kids these days sure are lazy*, I thought. *Surely Yukari wouldn't actually take it on herself to build all these things*, I thought. But, faced with this menacing tower (yes, the plastic model boxes were pretty bulky) of boxes, Yukari didn't look fazed at all. Rather, she was walking towards the boxes with the vigor of a hunter who was licking her lips at the sight of her prey.

"Anything I can help with?"

Hearing my offer, Yukari laughed and nodded.

"Wah. Really? Okay~~. There's a pair of wire clippers over there, so could you help cut off the parts from the runners?"

Runners were the plastic frames that held all the parts together, and you were supposed to build plastic models by cutting all the parts away from the runners first and then putting them together as instructed on the manual.

But Yukari didn't seem at all interested in instruction manuals, and just happily took the runners out from the boxes before beginning to clip off the parts.

Box by box... wait, she was taking out all the runners from *all* the boxes, putting them all in a pile, and then cutting them all at once.

She didn't seem to mind at all that pieces from different boxes were getting mixed with each other, but just picked up any runner she could get her hands onto, cut everything off with her wire clippers, and then just let all the parts scatter out onto the big plastic tarp she was working on without sorting them in any way whatsoever.



“Ah, Gaku-chan, there are pretty small pieces on those runners too, so make sure you get them all, okay~~?”

“Um, yeah, okay... more importantly, is it fine to make such a mess? How exactly are you going to figure out which piece is which...?”

“No problem, no problem. When it comes to PlaMo, just leave it to me!”

As if to prove her point, Yukari finished snipping off all the parts from all the runners and then began to put together the models without even glancing at the boxes or the instruction manuals.

She took one piece out from the jumbled-up mountain of parts and then cocked her head to the side.

She put that part to the side, and then picked up another part, and once again put it to her side... or so I thought, but in fact she actually had attached that part to the part she already had set aside. In a sense, it looked more like she was putting together a jigsaw puzzle than working with a PlaMo. She would randomly choose some part, put it together with another, and then in that random fashion put together the model. Honestly, it all seriously looked like it was happening by complete luck, but her hands moved swiftly and didn't stop. She only seemed to struggle a bit in the beginning, but before I realized it her hands were flowing like a stream and building up this robot. I had thought that the mountain of parts had no rhyme nor reason, but it looked like she knew exactly where each part was and where that part was supposed to go.

It wasn't even ten minutes before she had the first model finished, and it wasn't even seven minutes more before the second model was standing finished next to the first.

However, regardless of her speed, Yukari's work did not seem crude nor rough; she sometimes employed the help of a file, or some glue, or what looked to be clay, and swiftly but carefully assembled her robots.

I just looked on in mute amazement before asking a question.

“Looks like there's a lot of different robots here... do you know all of them? You've built them all before?”



"Hmm..." Yukari glanced at a nearby box and answered, all the while not stopping her work. "Well, I've made a few of them before I guess, but this is my first time with most of them. A lot of these models just came out."

"You haven't made them before, but you know how to? Like, you don't have to look at the instructions but you know which part goes where already?"

"I guess. I mean, if you look at the box you can see what the finished model looks, and... Well, okay. You might look at a robot and just think 'oh, that's pretty cool,' but each and every robot is designed in some way for a reason, you know? They don't just randomly look the way they do. So... this robot might be designed like this because he can fly... or this robot might have joints like this because he's built for speed... or maybe this robot has armor that's supposed to look like a lion... stuff like that. If you know the theme, then naturally you can figure out what each part is for and how to put them together."

"..... Well... okay... but that's still amazing..."

She said that like it was a piece of cake, but I really doubt anybody could just do it like she did. I really felt like I was watching a master at work.

I couldn't help but breathe a sigh of admiration. Yukari blushed a bit and gave me a little smile, but shook her head even as she gave birth to another robot.

"Well, I've made plenty of mistakes before, you know? Sometimes I can check with someone who actually knows, but then there's other times when I think something should look like a bird but it's actually supposed to look like an angel, or sometimes there really isn't any rhyme or reason to the design. So I guess it just comes down to experience."

... Well, if it was about experience, then there would be nobody who could top someone like Yukari, who saw every other living thing as a robot.

In a sense, this was a talent Yukari could be proud of that was given form by her special vision.



For some reason, I felt myself getting really excited for her, and I ended up briskly patting her on the head.

“But this is really amazing, Yukari! Seriously amazing! You could make a living off this, I think!”

“Wah. Maybe... I was thinking that maybe I’d like to be a modeler someday.”

“... Model...er? What’s that? You want to be a model?”

“Modelers are the people who design the prototypes for these plastic models.”

“Good idea! Model or modeler... it doesn’t matter! Yukari will make a great one! I mean, look at how good you are at making these things!”

I’m sure her purple-colored eyes would help her fulfill those dreams of hers.

The thought of that made me really happy for some reason, and I found myself unable to control my emotions as I began stroking Yukari excitedly on her head. But Yukari stopped me and looked at the plastic model boxes around her with a sad-looking look in her eyes.

After staring at those boxes for a little bit, she began to talk.

“But if I want to do that, I guess I have to get used to mecha anime too.”

“... Well, yeah, probably. Actually, wait... Yukari, you like robots that much, but you don’t watch mecha anime?”

“..... Mecha anime are just so cruel.”

“Hmm, really? But aren’t they made for kids?”

“But they’re still cruel... so I can’t ever watch them but I just end up buying all the plastic models. And then I build these robots imagining what kinds of great deeds they’re doing, and then I just check later with people who’ve seen the anime to see whether I was right or not.”



"..... Hmm, I see."

Yukari was looking at a model box featuring a heroic-looking robot with wings coming out his back.

He was holding onto a glowing stick (maybe a sword?) in one hand and was striking a gallant pose.

Many destroyed robots lay around him.

He was probably the main robot, and all the others lying broken around him used to be his enemies. He was standing in the midst of a great wreckage of what at one time had been working robots.

This was nothing more than a drawing, an object, and no blood had actually been spilt. But even then...

At last, Yukari began to assemble her robot again.

She took up part after part, putting them together swiftly but carefully, sometimes using a cloth to polish her creation. Her hands worked gently, affirming how much she loved robots, and how much she loved building them.

I couldn't help but mutter something.

"Maybe you can build one for me sometime too?"

Yukari quickly took the bait.

"Really? Let's go buy one together next time then! Mm, I think there's one that came out that would really fit Gaku-chan! Well, I'm actually not sure what kind of robot it is exactly... but it's really cool..."

But in the end, I thought to myself that for Yukari, it probably didn't matter what kind of robot it was.

For her, all robots were meant to be loved.

So as long as someone like that was the one building my robot, I would be satisfied no matter what.



Well, I guess there's no time like the present, because Yukari finished all the robots she had been asked to assemble before noon (honestly, I wonder why she didn't charge money for that work... did that make me a bad person?) and then dragged me to the model store and got me to buy a model that she recommended.

It was the type that used screws and was also unexpectedly big and pretty tall... but anyways.

We brought that model back to my house and went to my room to start to build it when Yukari revealed another one of her talents.

Actually, on that day, my room's air conditioner had broken.

We had called for people to come fix it, but it would be nighttime before they were available. That's why, to cool myself down, I had gone over and intruded on Yukari so early in the morning (well, I ended up sweating anyway since we were working in the garden), but now Yukari, in great spirits, used only the tools she had for building the plastic models and fixed my air conditioner for me. It seemed that the problem was just that the filter was clogged, but she briskly ignored the "Danger: Do Not Remove" seal on the machine and took the air conditioner apart piece by piece, before quickly assembling it back together like she was just putting together another plastic model. I was really surprised.

"Y-You almost made that look easy, but don't you need some kind of license or something to do that?"



“Yeah. So good boys and girls shouldn’t try and do what I do, and you definitely can’t tell anybody else about this, but I’m pretty good with home appliances! If you have the parts I can build you a fridge, or a stove, or even a computer! So just let me know if you need anything!”

Was this another skill born from her special eyes...? Seriously, people who had skills like these sure were amazing... If Yukari could already do this stuff when she was in junior high, she might actually be able to build real robots when she grew up... Or well...

“... Wow. Could. It. Be. Yukari. Is. Actually. Pretty. Smart?”

“Wah. Gaku-chan, why are you talking like that?”

... I had thought she was a bit of an idiot up until now, so I was actually a bit shocked.



“Umm, Miss President. My friend has a track competition tomorrow, so I was wondering if it’s going to be sunny.”

“Oh hoh hoh. Marii-chan has quite the affection for her friends, does she not? Hmm. Yes, it does appear that the sky is smiling upon us today, so I would be nary surprised if the sun were shining tomorrow in the morn.”

“Wah. Really? Great, thanks! Also, why are you talking like that?”

“..... If you must comment on it, I really would prefer you do so less directly...”

Our class president’s weather forecasts were almost never wrong.

In our class, if you wanted to know the weather, you asked the president. For example, even if the news said that it was going to be sunny, if the president said it would rain you made sure to bring an umbrella, and in most cases the class president would be right. She undoubtedly had a talent for reading the weather, so everyone in the class thought she would make an excellent fisherman, but she seemed intent on betraying all our hopes and dreams and was aiming to be a weather forecast lady instead.

But, I wonder if our president had noticed?

Noticed that it was Marii Yukari who first discovered she had this talent.

After all, it was Yukari who had been the first to ask the president for the weather.

Yukari asked, the president answered, and her prediction came true... that kind of exchange had happened so many times between Yukari and the president that soon everyone started asking the president about the weather, and eventually the president's accuracy became quite famous.

So, indeed it had been Yukari who had discovered the president's abilities.

I had once asked Yukari why she chose to ask the president about the weather, and she responded with a chuckle.

"Well, my eyes are telling me that Miss President has a lot of amazing sensors equipped. So I thought with all those sensors, predicting the weather would be a piece of cake for her."

... Of course, to me it didn't look like she had any sensors at all.



Just as our oracle had predicted, the next morning was a beautifully sunny autumn morning.

Yukari was in the highest of spirits and went to cheer on her track team friend whom she had known since elementary school, and I came along too.

But honestly, from how things were turning out, her friend really didn't need any cheering at all.

Yukari's track team friend was so obviously skilled of a runner that even a layperson like me could tell he was talented. And from the sound of the crowd, I anticipated that there were lots of hopes riding on the possibility that he could even make it to Nationals.

I mentioned to Yukari that it was pretty incredible she was friends with a person like him, and she puffed out her chest.



Arc 1: Various Notes on Marii

“Well, I was actually the one who told Shou-chan (her name for her track friend) to try track out. Shou-chan didn’t really know what club to join, so I gave him some advice.

I told him that he would be good in track.”

“... And the reason for that was... let me guess...”

Yukari nodded at me and leaned her head in towards my ear.

“... Please keep this a secret, but Shou-chan’s feet have amazing-looking rollers and Vernier Thrusters on them.”

Well, I knew what rollers were, but I didn’t know what she meant by Vernier Thrusters... I guess they were probably just something that would be very convenient for running.

As if to prove her point, Shou-chan kicked strongly off the ground and flew forward like the wind, easily outsprinting his opponents with his superior running.

Of course, just like the sensors on our class president, these rollers and Vernier Thrusters that were supposed to be attached to Yukari’s friend’s feet were not visible at all to normal people. But even then, seeing Yukari’s friend run, I couldn’t help but believe her a bit when she said he was using things like this. I mentioned this to Yukari, but she just let out a sigh and muttered to me.

“If Shou-chan actually used his rollers and Vernier Thrusters properly, he could run even faster though...”

For some reason, I felt a chill run through my spine.



After finishing up lunch at school, Yukari and I were chatting idly when I decided to jokingly ask her what kind of guy she was into.

Yukari blushed and looked down, before covering both her cheeks with her hands as if she was aware she was heating up. I heard a lot of *wah, wah, wah*’s coming from her before she seemed to steady herself and answered me.

“..... Kasoku-kun.”

I almost fell over in shock.

At the same time, I heard a terrible clanging behind me, and when I looked back I saw that Tenjou had fallen over while clutching a desk.

I had no idea why Tenjou was even here, since she was in a different class, but when she realized we were looking at her she quickly stood up, hoisted the desk back into its upright position, dusted off her uniform, and gave us a haughty “hmph” before swiftly turning around and leaving the room. But whatever.

By Kasoku, Yukari was referring to Kasoku Tomonori, a boy in our class.

In other words, a boy who not only existed, but existed pretty close to us already.

To be honest, I really wasn’t expecting this.

Just like girls tended to really admire guy idols, I was expecting her to pull some really cool robot from some robot anime she had seen to answer my question.

But no... she picked “Kasoku-kun”...?

Someone as random and completely unremarkable as “Kasoku-kun”?

His personality was... well, I didn’t know much about him, but my impressions of him didn’t go much farther than “wow, he has really narrow eyes...” So you could probably tell that he didn’t have many traits that stuck out, and that he didn’t have much of a personality, and yet he’s the guy that Yukari would choose? Exactly when and how did a guy like that manage to bewitch a pure girl like Yukari? Maybe he looked cooler through Yukari’s purple eyes?

It seemed that the human body could lose all its strength when exposed to situations that were just way too shocking; I collapsed into my chair and sprawled out on my desk, unable to stand up again.

“..... K-Kasoku, you said? *That* Kasoku? ... That completely unremarkable Kasoku? Exactly what about him do you like...?”



Yukari looked a bit embarrassed and paused for a while before answering.

“... Well, you know they say that a man and his drill is a romance made in heaven?¹ ... That doesn’t mean only men like drills. I think drills are pretty romantic too.”

“..... Huh?”

“Kasoku-kun is designed to look pretty human, but he has an amazing drill. It’s big and shiny and it makes me shake just looking at it. It’s not spinning right now but it gives this feeling that if he ever decided to use it, nobody would be able to do anything to stop him, or something like that...”

I squinted my eyes at Kasoku, who had his back turned towards us and was eating lunch, but of course I couldn’t see anything like a drill.

“... I’m not sure what you mean, but... do you mean he’s kinda a dangerous guy? Drills make for pretty dangerous weapons, don’t they?”

“Wah. No no no, drills are just tools for cutting, right? But... they’re also romantic.”

... Romantic? What was...?

Yukari continued, her cheeks still tinged slightly red.

“There are other people who have drills, but Kasoku-kun’s definitely is the best. Well, the student council president’s drill also comes really close though...”

“Student council president? She has a drill too? She’s a girl though... didn’t you just say drills are for guys?”

“Yeah, the student council president has one. But unlike Kasoku-kun’s drill, her drill is always spinning, but it’s spinning so amazingly fast that you can’t tell it’s moving at all. It’s really cool-looking... like some kind of glittering sword. That’s why whenever I’m in front of the president I always feel kinda nervous.”

¹ Complete expression is “doriru ha otoko no roman.” A phrase that is sometimes used in mecha anime, etc.



"..... By the way, what about me? Do I have something... something like that?"

I was supposed to never ask her about what I looked like, but that question came out of my mouth before I realized it, and I think Yukari was also going with the flow so much that she just answered me straight away.

"Gaku-chan doesn't have anything like a drill, but she's all-purpose and that makes her super strong."

"U-Uhh, all-purpose?"

"Yeah. Gaku-chan has all these amazing adaptable compartments... with the right parts you could travel by land, air, or sea... even survive in vacuum or in the middle of a pool of lava! Short distance... long distance... you can deal with it all! That's pretty amazing, you know? Having this kind of adaptability is... wah! Wait! You're not supposed to ask me about that!"

"Ahh, sorry."

All-purpose... adaptable compartments... those were all words I wasn't used to hearing very much, and yet Yukari's words sunk surprisingly deep into my mind.

I see... if I were a robot, then yes I could see myself being something like that... Without any reason whatsoever, I manage to convince myself of that.

I just had the feeling that she had hit the bulls-eye on this other me that I didn't know.

So... this was how Yukari saw things through her eyes.

"..... By the way, these adaptable compartments... could I also attach a drill to one of them?"

"Wah. Gaku-chan thinks it's romantic too now, huh?"

"..... Nah..... just thought I'd ask..."

For the record, from that day on, Tenjou began to not only aim her attacks at me and Yukari, but also at Kasoku.

And this may sound utterly absurd, but... well, I thought with that amazing drill of his, Kasoku could probably deal with Tenjou without me or Yukari rushing to his help.



It was the same day as when the police apprehended a suspect in relation to what had become popularly known as the “Tokyo Dismemberment Murder.”

That day, Yukari’s parents had left with her siblings to go on a parent-child camping trip organized by the elementary school, so I went over to hang out and spend the night at Yukari’s place.

It wasn’t rare for us to have sleepovers, but my place was a dojo and was really noisy, while Yukari’s place had her siblings who adored her so much that they wouldn’t shut up.

With her siblings gone, we could relax and enjoy our time together, so I found myself really looking forward to today, but ever since I got to Yukari’s place around noon she just seemed completely restless about something.

I had seen a notice about the arrest of a suspect in the “Tokyo Dismemberment Murder” on the morning news, and the story was on the afternoon news as well.

And Yukari was watching that news with rapt attention, almost as if she was getting sucked into the TV.

Even when I spoke up to her, I got nothing but absentminded responses in return.

After the news ended, she flipped through the other channels, looking for other programs that were talking about the murder.

When her search returned no results, she opened up a newspaper instead and began to stare a hole through a photo of the apprehended suspect.



Yukari looked like she was backed into a corner by something, but I restrained myself from asking and just watched over her.

Eventually...

“... Sorry, just give me a minute.”

Yukari apologized to me, and then seemed to steel herself for something and dialed out somewhere on her phone.

She took the telephone receiver and went down into the garden. Maybe she didn't want me to listen in?

I plopped down on my side on the porch and idly stared at the plastic robot model in front of me as I casually listened in on Yukari's phone conversation.

“Hello... yes, this is Marii. Umm... yes. I saw it in the paper... but that suspect doesn't look like the murderer to me.”

Startled, I lifted my body up and looked at Yukari.

Yukari had already hung up the phone, and when she realized I was staring at her, she gave me a weak smile.

“..... Sorry, Gaku-chan. Umm, there might be some people coming over tonight.”

In fact, it wasn't even night, but early evening when a few visitors showed up.

There were two men; one older man completely adorned in a suit, while another, younger one who stood by and looked slightly less professional. The younger man was carrying a briefcase.

Even before they introduced themselves, I could tell that the two of them were somehow connected with the police.

When they approached the porch, they finally noticed my presence and seemed rather alarmed. The briefcase-carrying younger man stiffened and seemed to want to say something to me, but the older man stopped him.

He probably had noticed. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Yukari had hid herself behind me and was gripping my elbow with just a finger.

The older man spoke.

“You sure about her?”

Yukari started a bit and quickly let go of me, but before she could answer I nodded and once again wrapped Yukari’s arm around my own, making it clear that I wouldn’t let her go.

The older man thought in silence for a while before nodding.

They stood in front of the porch and showed no signs of wanting to come up into the house. Instead, they began talking right there.

“... Well, let’s get this done with quickly then, shall we? Marii-san, I apologize but... please take a look at these.”

The older man looked at the younger, and the latter took an envelope out from his briefcase and handed it to Yukari.

He also spoke to me.

“... You should probably look away.”

What came out of the envelope were photos that were filled with red.

The red of blood... and the red of dismembered body parts.

Dark red, light red... various reds that decorated various pieces of discolored skin...

I knew exactly what those photos were just with a glance.

They were photos of a murder crime scene.

Of the crime scene for the Tokyo Dismemberment Murder. And those photos... they weren’t fakes. They were the real thing.

I quickly averted my gaze, but I felt my vision haze and the blood draining from my face.



It was ultimately the warmth from Yukari's arms that helped me manage to stop myself from completely succumbing to the oncoming darkness.

Yukari's arms were clutching tightly to mine as she looked at those photographs.

Her body was trembling, but she didn't look away at all.

I planted my feet firm into the ground. If I couldn't look at those photos, I could at least try to support Yukari here as much as possible.

How long was it that we remained like that?

"..... I've had enough."

Yukari finally spoke up and put the photos away.

"Okay, now have a look at these."

The younger man passed a binder to Yukari next.

I readied myself, expecting another round of terrifying photos, but it was actually a scrapbook of photos of different people.

They looked like suspect records; I saw the mug shots of five people taped onto a brief record of their personal histories.

There was a middle-aged woman, a somewhat elderly man, a girl wearing a sailor's uniform... there wasn't any consistent pattern to the people in the photos I saw.

These documents were probably copies of the originals, as much of the information had been censored by magic marker to keep others from reading the suspects' names or addresses.

There were multiple photos of each person taken from different angles, and Yukari looked through those photos again and again.

Finally, Yukari pointed at one photo.

"... It's her."

The younger man looked surprised.

“... T-This girl?”

The photo Yukari had pointed at was one of the girl in the sailor’s uniform. No matter how you looked at it, she was still underage, and couldn’t have been out of high school yet.

The middle-aged man didn’t even blink, but the younger man was clearly disturbed by these events. However, Yukari didn’t mind him and continued.

“... Yes. It is probably her... the way the body was *destroyed*... out of these five, the only one who could’ve done it... this way... is her.”

After she finished that sentence, Yukari hurriedly shook her head fervently.

“Ah, umm... of course, that’s just what it looks like to me. I can’t say anything for sure...”

“We know. We are using your opinion as nothing more than for reference, and you do not need to worry yourself over what comes of this investigation... I do apologize again... making a child like you help with something like this...”

“... No, it’s fine... I’m the one who called you this time...”



In the end, the two men took their leave without ever coming up into the house.

At that moment, Yukari got a phone call from her parents who were still at the parent-child camping trip, so I was left watching the two men leave by myself.

At some point, the sun had set, and it was now dark outside.

Just as the two men were about to get into the car they had parked outside, the older man turned to me and spoke to me in broken fragments.

“... You... her eyes... do you know?”



"Yes. I know."

The middle-aged man seemed to understand and shrugged. He took out a cigarette from his bag and lit it.

The lit end of his cigarette burned ever brightly red through the night's darkness.

He took a deep draw from his cigarette, exhaled, but for some reason stopped there and disposed of his cigarette in a portable ashtray he had taken out of his pocket. He then looked me in the eye again and spoke.

"Her eyes... they are a very rare gift."

"... I know."

"If you can... please be there for her in the future."

"I don't need you to tell me that."

The man nodded before giving me a rather pained smile. He then got into his car and rode away.

I watched until I couldn't see his car's lights in the distance anymore before going back into the house, where I was sure Yukari was waiting for me.

A week later, I read in the newspaper that the suspect in the Tokyo Dismemberment Murder had been released.



In the end, Yukari's talent with assembling plastic models and home electronics were really just secondary to her true ability.

She saw other living things as robots, and that itself was her true ability.

Her ability was her gift from God that made her who she was, and yet it was also her curse. I could neither reject nor refuse to acknowledge that ability, and without including her ability concepts like "Yukari's



happiness” and “Yukari’s misfortune” were devoid of meaning. So, I had no choice but to accept that ability unconditionally. To reject it would be tantamount to rejecting the existence known as “Marii Yukari” itself.

And so, I would not reject it.
I would not refuse it.

I would never, ever reject her purple eyes.



It was lunchtime on one day.

For once, Tenjou Nanami had come over but didn't try to pick a fight (well, not too much, at least); instead she sat with us and we ate lunch together. But, as soon as she closed the lid on her bento box, her lips warped into a smile and she began to speak.

"..... Hey, Marii. I've been getting quite fascinated by sci-fi lately, you see..."

It seemed to me that she had come over and had been all friendly just so she could bring this up, so I prepared myself for the worst, but Yukari just happily looked at Tenjou and nodded, eager to listen to what she had to say.

Tenjou showed us a rather wicked smile and continued.

"Marii, have you ever thought about things this way? It's not that you see other humans as robots... but what you see is, in fact, *reality*."

"Huh?"

"In other words, all of us just believe that we're human, but in reality we're all robots. Yes... we're all robots that were planted here by aliens to invade and take over Earth."

"Invade? Take over?"



“Yes. These aliens gave us human form and memories so we could blend into human society quite easily, and nobody can tell us apart from real humans. There is nothing different about us. And we ourselves have even forgotten the fact that aliens ordered us to blend into this planet, but when the right time comes, our memories as invasion robots will resurface and we will begin taking over the Earth.

But, nobody knows that right now.

You, and only you, can see us for what we really are. You are the only one who can see the reality of the situation, the only one who can save this planet. Hmm... or maybe that’s not it. Instead, maybe the invasion is already over, and we’re all just robots who think we’re human, but you are the only real human left. What would you do if that were true?”

I felt myself completely about to blow my top as Tenjou got farther and farther into her little story.

But Yukari just looked at Tenjou, gave her a smile, and answered.

“... Umm, Ten-chan... I think Gaku-chan won’t be too happy when she hears me say this either, but...”

“What is it?”

“I’ve never ever thought that what I see through these eyes has been anything but the truth.”

When Yukari said that, I felt her eyes looked especially clear and commanding.

It just made me think... Yukari must be a really strong person.

Well, in retrospect that was pretty obvious. With her different way of viewing the world, Yukari had definitely been tested again and again, and yet here she was after having overcome all those challenges. There was no way she was weak. The world wouldn’t allow her to be.

No matter what her purple eyes showed her, Yukari would definitely never lose.

If anybody had to lose, it wouldn’t be Yukari...



It would be the people around her.



There was something of a hill along the path from my house to Marii's, and from the top of that hill I could not only gaze down at Yukari's house in the town below, but also could find some shady areas under some trees where I could rest. It was a spot I had taken quite a liking to.

When I went over to Yukari's house to hang out, whether I planned to or not, I would always be sure to pause atop that hill and take a look.

Sometimes, Yukari came out into the garden and watered the grass, or made plastic models, or repaired some electronics, or played with her siblings. There were times when I just sat there and watched her.

..... This all might make me sound like a bit of a stalker.

But, seeing her down there really soothed my soul.

I dunno, but seeing a small little thing down there darting to and fro just gave me a warm feeling inside.

Okay, granted, I knew that this was more of an excuse, and I knew all too well that what I was doing wasn't exactly looked kindly upon by society, so when I went up that hill today and saw that there was already someone there, I got this irritating, hard-to-describe feeling of shame in my gut and the urge to run away welled up inside me.

Unfortunately, the person who was already there noticed me before



I could run off, and called out to me.

“Hey, Bobby.”

“Don’t call me Bobby. You’re the only one who calls me that... Tenjou.”

It would be rather pointless to hide at this point, so feeling rather resigned, I pushed my bicycle up to Tenjou and stood next to her.

Ugh, what the hell was *she* doing here?

When I looked down at Yukari’s house, I saw her in the garden working on her bicycle.

Today, we were planning to ride our bicycles together.

When I saw her down there wearing a smile from ear to ear and spinning the back wheel of her bicycle (which was standing upside down on the ground), I felt my own cheek muscles relax, but then when I remembered that Tenjou was right next to me, I hurriedly focused myself again.

... Was Tenjou being in my favorite spot a complete coincidence?

Or maybe she knew about me and this spot already?

Well, it was certainly a very nice spot, so it could be that Tenjou also occasionally came up here to look down at Yukari’s house.

In that case, I might have just not noticed her here before, but she might’ve seen me up here quite a few times already, and might have seen me staring down at Yukari’s house quite a few times as well... When I thought about that possibility, I suddenly felt really awkward and glared at Tenjou. But when I saw her face, I couldn’t bring myself to say anything.

As she was looking down at Yukari’s house, Tenjou just looked... lonely.

It was like I was looking at a child who was about to break out in tears at a moment’s notice.



Before I could stop myself, I blurted something out curtly.

“Just make up with her already.”

“..... Eh?”

“I have no idea what happened between you and Yukari, but... it’s just a waste for you to just keep dragging this out.”

Yukari and Tenjou used to be on quite good terms, it seemed.

But, Yukari did something and now they were estranged from each other.

To be precise, Tenjou now considered Yukari an enemy.

Girls tended to turn something small into an argument and then drag that argument out for a long time... I wasn’t completely innocent of this either, but even then I can’t say I understood what Tenjou felt here.

I felt that in most cases, Tenjou didn’t seem like she genuinely hated Yukari, but rather just refused to be honest with herself.

But, sometimes the expressions I saw on Tenjou’s face completely betrayed that interpretation.

At those times, Tenjou would glare at Yukari as if she was confronting her mortal enemy, and would reject Yukari as if she had just come face-to-face with a monster.

At those times, her look was clearly one of hatred.

I was still a child, but even I could tell; at those times I was looking at a severe, intense, fervent sense of purpose.

Exactly what had happened for Yukari to deserve to be on the receiving end of such negative emotions? I really couldn’t even imagine.

We were looking at the same “Yukari” down there, but could it be that Tenjou and I saw different things...?

Tenjou muttered.



"Hatou... you... you still don't understand, do you?"

"That again? Exactly what about Yukari do you think I don't understand?"

"Have you ever heard the phrase 'philosophical zombie'?"

"..... Huh?"

Those words had come out of the blue, and I was taken off guard for a moment.

Tenjou gave me a rather dry smile and continued.

"To put it simply, a philosophical zombie can look at an apple and *know* that it's red, but cannot *feel* it. That's my understanding, at least."

"Okay..."

"You can't tell if someone's a philosophical zombie or a human based on their appearance or actions... and don't take the word 'zombie' too seriously. I'm not talking about the walking corpse kind of zombie here. These zombies can express emotions just fine. They can laugh, can cry, can get angry, and when they see an apple they can talk about how red and delicious it looks.

However, they do not *feel* that the apple is red or delicious.

And that is because they do not have a grasp on any concrete, emotional image of what 'redness' or 'deliciousness' means.

... For example, when we see something delicious we begin to salivate. That's because we know *from experience* what it means for something to be delicious. But philosophical zombies will salivate only because they know about deliciousness *as just another piece of knowledge*. They don't feel that the apple looks delicious, but just know that it does... the outwards result is the same, but there is still a huge difference here, no?"

"..... So, are you saying that Yukari is like that?"

Hearing my words, Tenjou chuckled and nodded.



“Well, she doesn’t fit the precise definition of a philosophical zombie, but relatively speaking doesn’t it make sense? After all, we can never share the experiences that Marii’s eyes give to her. If we’re talking about Marii alone, then she might not be a philosophical zombie, but as people who can never see the same things she can, who can never feel the same things she can, who can never experience ‘redness’ or ‘deliciousness’ in the same way she can, doesn’t that make her something like a philosophical zombie to us, and vice versa...?”

Did you know? Marii can’t really distinguish between humans and plastic models.”

I saw tears pooling up in Tenjou’s eyes.

Those tears started to drip quietly from her eyes, but Tenjou didn’t even seem to notice and just continued.

“Well, no, putting it like that is unfair... yes, she sees other humans as robots, and yes she can tell the difference between the human *robots* and the plastic model robots. However... she doesn’t see the difference between humans and plastic models. To her, the difference lies only in a difference of size, height, intricacy, whether the robot can act independently or not... it doesn’t go any deeper than that. Is something organic or not, living or dead... she doesn’t make the distinction! These differences might be obvious to us, but she doesn’t see them... she *can’t*! To her, humans, electrical appliances, plastic models... they might have different abilities and purposes and complexities, but they’re all the same! She sees us exactly the same as she sees plastic models!”

Tenjou seemed to be getting agitated as her voice grew louder and louder. I looked her straight in the face.

“So... that’s how you see things.”

“Huh?”

“But... can’t you see it the other way around?”

“... Other way around?”

Yes, the other way around, I muttered to myself in my mind.

Everything that Tenjou had just said, I had already realized myself.



I had already realized that if you took the argument to the extreme, it was possible that Yukari saw us as no different from plastic models.

But, that's precisely why I wanted to believe that the opposite of what Tenjou was implying was true.

I averted my gaze from Tenjou and looked down at the houses below.

I saw Yukari down there, wearing working gloves and happily servicing her bicycle.

She had named her bicycle "Silver," and she told me that ever since she had gotten Silver as a present for entering elementary school, they had always been together.

She herself installed her own training wheels, took them off later, adjusted the saddle higher when she grew, reinforced the body of the bicycle, changed out the tires and the chain... she had upgraded and remodeled it many a time, so that even now that she was in junior high she still considered it precious and used it frequently. Her bicycle was her beloved partner.

Yes... it was the opposite.

It wasn't that Yukari considered us to be the same as plastic models or electrical appliances.

Rather, Yukari considered plastic models or electrical appliances to be human. And so she held them all as precious. And so she had so much fun taking care of them. She didn't see humans the same as plastic models, but rather, she saw plastic models the same as humans.

Was I just arguing semantics?

Perhaps.

But, even so, in the end, even if the end result was the same, I had the feeling that those two situations were completely different...

I looked at Tenjou, and saw her staring straight down at Yukari's house as if her eyes had been glued fixed.



So, I quietly began to push my bicycle away from her.

“..... Anyways, just do what you want, Tenjou. I’ve said what I wanted to say.”

I straddled my bicycle saddle, when I heard Tenjou speak to me again.

“Hatou. You... if you plan on being with that girl from now on, you’ll soon realize exactly how terrifying she is. Exactly how fundamentally different she is from us. And when that happens, I’m sure you’ll also... this is a warning, okay? Take it however you wish.”

“I see. Thanks for that then. See you later.”

I said farewell one more time and began to pedal, not looking back.



I stopped my bicycle in front of Yukari’s gate and went around to the garden.

“Wah. Gaku-chan, good morning! You’re early today. Sorry, just wait a little bit more? I’ll be done in just a bit.”

Yukari began to go get her siblings to bring us some tea, but I waved her off, telling her not to worry about me. I plopped myself down on the porch.

Then, watching her back as she oiled her bicycle, I suddenly had an urge to ask.

“Hey, Yukari.”

“Hm?”

“... Me or your bicycle. Which do you like better?”

“Wah? Eh, wah, wah, wah?”

“..... Ah, nevermind. It’s fine. Just forget I said anything.”



Yukari was clearly startled as she went wah, wah, wah, like a broken record player, so I quickly waved my hand in reassurance and tried to defuse the situation. I took my other hand and lightly put it over top my rather plain chest.

... Ugh, that definitely was a shock to the heart.

Well, whatever. She's been together with Silver since elementary school, after all, so I guess it can't be helped... yeah, but this battle was far from over.

I looked up at the hill, towards the other side which was hidden from view.

As if I'll lose to you, I thought.



Three days from then, on Saturday morning, I saw on the news that the new suspect in the Tokyo Dismemberment Murder had killed a detective and was currently running from the authorities.



I had a bad feeling about today... is what I could've said if I wanted to sound cool, but it's not like I really had any real premonitions or anything like that.

Because I practiced the naginata, people at school thought I must be a pretty old-fashioned person, and it's certainly true that following my grandmother training, I always made sure to clasp my hands together in front of our family shrine every morning, but to be honest I didn't believe in spiritualism or sixth senses or anything like that.

When I saw that the new suspect in the Tokyo Dismemberment Murder was on the run, I immediately wanted to run over to Yukari's place, but that was not because of supernatural senses or something, but simply because I knew Yukari seemed rather preoccupied with that particular case.

She was probably already pretty anxious since she didn't know how the investigation was going, but now with this news I could imagine she was really shaken.

If I went to her, I might be able to be her support. I might be able to help her relax.

The moment I thought of that, I felt myself growing ever restless, and, taking advantage of the fact that it was Saturday, I decided to head over to Yukari's house in the morning.



If I really did have a sixth sense, when I heard the doorbell ring I probably wouldn't have assumed it was Yukari coming over because she was scared, and I probably wouldn't have bounded over and opened the door without any further thought whatsoever.

But I did, and I was met with a girl giving me a sweet smile.

I felt a ringing in my head when I first caught sight of this older, slender girl with long hair. I thought that the ringing came from the fact that this was the first time I'd seen someone this beautiful, but in reality my brain was trying to point something completely different out to me, and as I tried to calm my heart by taking a few deep breaths, I finally noticed.

She was much, much older than she had appeared in her photo, but this girl... she was *her*.

The same girl that Yukari had pointed out that night, after staring so long at those gruesome crime scene photos.

My practice with the naginata should've tempered my mind and body, but I found in that instant that I couldn't move a single muscle.

I couldn't even call out, but only watched helplessly as the girl pushed what looked like a stun gun into my stomach.

She chuckled and spoke.

"Why so afraid? Don't worry, I won't kill you that quick. You're going to be my precious bait, after all.

... Marii Yukari, was it?

That girl who has the same eyes as I do... you'll be quite useful for drawing her out."

Her words seemed to knock me out of my stupor, and I felt I could finally move my limbs again.

"Don't screw with me!" I shouted, leaping at her...

And then, I knew no more.



When I next came to, I found myself in some kind of unfamiliar factory, lying on my back.

Well, to be precise, I think I was lying on my back, but I honestly didn't really know what position I was in.

It was almost as if I was weightless, but I couldn't even tell if I was standing upright or lying on my side.

The only thing that led me to the conclusion that I was lying down was that I think I was staring at a wide factory ceiling right now. But even then, I couldn't say for sure what I was looking at... it was like my brain had decided it was too annoying to think right now and was refusing to work, so I honestly couldn't say if that was really the ceiling that I saw.

My mind was all befuddled yet stinging, while there was a vague throbbing around my midsection... I definitely felt rather strange.

I tried to rotate my head to check my surroundings, but my neck wouldn't budge at all.

Exactly what contraption was I being bound with right now...? Actually, was I being restrained at all? It honestly didn't feel like it, yet my head wouldn't move. I desperately strained to at least get my eyes to move and finally saw what looked like a person there.

The girl who had shot me with that stun gun was there.

In the midst of that hazy, distorted scenery that seemed to come straight out of a bad dream, I saw her sitting on some kind of stand and looking down at me with a smile.

But, rather than that obnoxious face of hers, my eyes were drawn to what she was holding in her hand.

For some reason, she was holding onto a *mannequin arm*.

My vision was a bit hazy, as if a light mist had descended over everything and taken me out from reality, and within that surreal world that mannequin arm gave off a bizarre sense of presence.



Oh, how I tried to look away, but for some reason my eyes were pinned to it.

For some reason... I felt like I'd seen that *arm* before. I felt like it was something close to me.

There really wasn't any good reason I should feel that *arm* before, but I just had the feeling that, somehow, I knew that arm quite well... was that because *that thing* looked just a bit too real? I figured it was just a mannequin arm because it was *only an arm*, but taking a better look at it, the elbow part of the arm was bright red, almost as though it had been severed from a body just now by some kind of blade or something... was that a movie prop? Suddenly, I began to get a really bad feeling in the pit of my stomach...

The girl chuckled and spoke.

"Oh my, awake, are you? How lucky for you to wake up... I should warn you that it's in your best interest to not fall asleep again. I used up all my own special anesthesia already, so the next time your eyes shut they'll most likely be shut for good... Well, in any case, you're clearly beyond saving already, but wouldn't it be nice to be able to cling to life for just that one minute longer?"

The girl stuck her tongue out and licked the *mannequin's fingers*, and I wanted to look away from what was turning into a rather inappropriate scene, but I couldn't even shut my eyes, let alone move my head. Instead, I thought a bit about what she had just said.

Anesthesia?

Is that why I felt so strange?

But, I was also perfectly conscious... well, no, I wouldn't say *perfectly*... ah, my head is spinning...

"Oh, right, I do believe this belongs to you."

The girl said that and then pointed the mannequin arm towards me.

When that arm came closer, I finally realized that the mannequin's arm was in fact a left arm, and that the arm was also gripping onto a cell phone.



... Was that my cell phone? The one I had just bought?

The cell phone fell from the mannequin arm's grip and went out of view.

Judging from where she dropped the phone, it should've landed around my chest, but I didn't feel anything. Was that because of the anesthesia?

My cell phone... unconsciously, tears began to well up in my eyes.

I had just gotten that phone for my birthday... and Yukari had modded it for me too. It was a one-of-a-kind cell phone.

Yeah... I should've called her... should've called Yukari first. She was the first entry in my contact list too, but I still wasn't used to using the phone, and now things were like this...

... Yukari?

I remembered what this girl had said right before I had lost consciousness, and I tried to talk.

But, of course my lips did not move.

She had said something about her own special anesthesia, but exactly what kind of anesthesia would reduce someone to a state like this?

... Also, why anesthesia in the first place? If she just wanted to bind me, there were plenty of easier ways...

Right then.

The girl suddenly turned to the side.

I wanted to see what was going on, but since I couldn't turn my head, I was just left staring at this girl's facial expression.

The girl seemed to be looking at something, and her lips slanted into a smile.



“..... So you finally came. Quite late, I must say. I almost thought you had abandoned this girl here.”

A response echoed through the room. It was a voice I recognized.

“Gaku-chan!”

I finally understood what was happening.

Yukari had come.

She had been called out by this suspec-... no, by this murderer.

All because she had used me as a hostage...

I felt my vision darken.

Run! I wanted to shout, but I couldn’t move at all. It felt almost like I wasn’t in my own body. No matter how much effort I put into it, no matter how much I prayed... only my ears still worked, and I just lay there helplessly as I heard Yukari’s footsteps approaching.

No... please... Yukari, don’t come...

Your eyes had been right all along.

This girl was the true culprit behind the Tokyo Dismemberment Murder.

She was dangerous... too dangerous...

I heard someone gasp.

“That’s terrible... why would you do something like that to Gaku-chan...?”

“... You’re quite different from what I had imagined. Are you really Marii Yukari?”

“You said on Gaku-chan’s cell phone... there was something you wanted to ask me? I’m here... I didn’t bring anybody else... but why did you have to do something this terrible to Gaku-chan? Just to ask me something?”



I could hear tears mixed in with her words.

As Yukari began to sob, the other girl seemed to be rather disappointed, and tossed the mannequin arm towards me while heaving a long sigh (it should've landed somewhere around my midsection, but of course I felt nothing).

"Before anything else, I just want to check... you're the girl who found me out, aren't you? You're Marii Yukari... the girl who sees humans as robots, aren't you? You have nothing to hide. I spent a *nice, long time* with that young detective and he told me everything."

The news had mentioned something about her killing a detective before running...

Silence fell upon the warehouse.

The girl rested her sneaker on my shoulder.

And I heard Yukari respond in the affirmative.

"..... Yes. That's me."

The girl let out a shrill laugh.

"I see, I see. Well, I do have a confession to make. *I'm the same way.*"

"Eh?"

"Well, in my case it's not really robots. It's more like everyone looks like *bags of flesh* to me."

Her toes ground themselves into my shoulder (is what I think was happening, but I wasn't exactly able to feel anything very well right now).

"Yes, to me, humans look like nothing but piles of flesh that have been strung together. It's been like that for as long as I can remember. Everyone always tells me that life is a precious thing, and yet I've never been able to feel 'life.' That's why I can do things like this without blinking.



Don't you see? Our eyes might show us different things, but we are the same, are we not?"

"....."

"And since you and I have the same eyes, I wanted to ask you something. Something that I would never be able to ask normal people and expect a calm answer back. But I'm sure someone like you would have no fear and would give me a fair answer to my questions."

"... Ask me about what?"

"About the truth."

The girl stopped stepping on me and showed me her back. She was probably facing Yukari again, with her feet shoulder width apart and her hands on her hips.

"Marii Yukari. You see humans as robots. Am I correct?"

"Yes."

"And robots themselves also look like robots to you, yes? You're not saying that humans look like robots, and robots look like humans to you, correct?"

"Yes. Robots also look like robots."

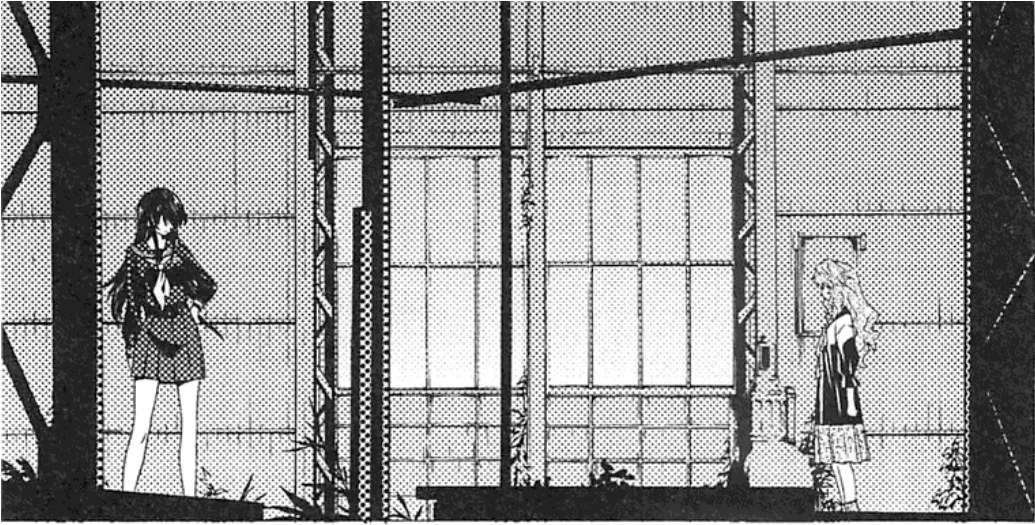
The girl took in a deep breath, seeming relieved.

And then, she asked.

"... Then, answer me this. The humans who look like robots and the normal robots... from your point of view, is there any difference between the two?"

"None."

The conversation was cut short with just that one word.





Silence filled the air.

And soon that silence was replaced by hysterical laughter.

The girl, she was laughing.

Her entire body was convulsing back and forth like a caterpillar as she laughed, and I almost thought she was having a seizure. Tears even began to pool in her eyes.

After her shrill laughter had echoed through the warehouse for a while, the girl wiped away the tears from the corners of her eyes and shouted.

“Yes! Yes, that’s it! That’s the truth! Thank you! That’s exactly what I wanted to know! ... Look, just look. My eyes have been right all along. My eyes have been showing me the truth all along. Humans are nothing more than bags of flesh. Nothing more than contraptions built of organic matter. Life, that precious thing, is but a lie! Such a thing are nothing more than an illusion, nothing more than a mere concept. There is no such thing as a soul.”

“.....”

“In the olden days, people believed that the earth was one flat piece of land on the shell of a tortoise, and that the sea trickled down into the cosmos, but that was just a delusion born from ignorance. In the olden days, people decided that the earth was the center of the universe and all things in the universe revolved around the Earth, but in reality the Earth was nothing more than another planet orbiting the Sun. In the olden days, people believed that humans had been created human from the very beginning, but in reality humans are nothing more than a type of monkey.

Even now, humans believe that they have souls, that they are imbued with life.

But, just as the geocentric theories had been wrong in the past, that is but a delusion that is waiting to be broken. That is but a delusion that humans created to make themselves feel special.

In reality, humans are nothing more than slightly more advanced machines that can move around in more complicated ways.



Yet humans just continue to mistake this for 'living'...

No, neither 'life' nor 'the soul' exist. That is reality."

"....."

"Yes, I was right all along. My eyes were not mistaken. Yes, I had wanted to know all this time. Life, the soul... people say these things are precious, but I've always wanted to know if things like that really existed. Things like that, which I've never been able to sense myself. Were my eyes just abnormal? Or was it the rest of the world that was wrong?

And no matter who I cut into little pieces, I could never find the answer to that question. Until I asked you. You gave me the answer.

Everyone else was wrong. The rest of the world was wrong. The one who had been right all along *was me*.

Humans are not precious. They are not special existences who possess souls, but are just things that can move in slightly more complicated ways than machines. They are merely moving sacks of flesh... that is the human's true form, a form endowed with neither life, nor a soul, and-"

"Why do you think that?"

Yukari casually let that question loose, almost as if she had had enough of this girl's long monologue. The girl responded with a proud look on her face.

"Why, you ask? Isn't it obvious?! Weren't you the one who said it?! Humans are no different from the robots they themselves create, you said!"

"... So what?"

Yukari piled on another question, and the girl shrugged her shoulders, seeming surprised that Yukari didn't understand. She began to talk again, sounding like she was lecturing a child...



When she suddenly looked around her with suspicion.

It seemed like she had heard something.

But before the girl could confirm what it was, Yukari's voice rang through the warehouse and pressed her for a response.

"Yes, that is indeed what I said. There's no difference between those two. But how did you get from what I said to your conclusion?"

"Well, that's... what don't you understand? Look, it's like this, right? Robots do not live and they do not have souls, so if humans are no different from robots, then humans also--"

"Why do you think that?"

This time, Yukari's voice was crystal clear.

I heard a rustling sound somewhere.

It was a really dry, light sound.

If a big bug moved along the floor, it might sound something like this. My mind was so hazy that I thought it was my imagination for a second, but it seemed the girl had heard the sound too and once again was looking all around her.

She was no longer smiling.

Her body stiffened up as she spoke.

"... What was that just now?"

"..... What was what?"

The girl became enraged at Yukari's obviously evasive answer.

"Don't screw with me! Don't tell me... I told you to not bring anybody else with you, but you called the police and--"

"Wah! No! I really didn't bring anybody else! But... well... I did think this was a bit unfair of me, but I was pretty scared... and you



told me to not bring anybody else, but you never told to not bring *anything* else, so...

More importantly, let's continue.

Just because there's no difference between humans and robots, why does that mean humans aren't alive? Why do you think robots have no souls?"

"... T-That's... that's obvi-"

The girl's body shook and she took a step back.

What was wrong with her? Exactly what was happening?

I could hear Yukari's voice closer to me than it was before.

"This might be a bit rude, but I don't think your eyes are any different from normal human eyes. You just want to feel like you're special, but your eyes aren't special at all. They aren't the same as my eyes."

"H-How dare you say that."

"I really don't know a lot about hard things like 'life' or 'souls.' But I'll answer only the question you asked me. Yes, to me, humans and robots aren't all that different. And so-"

"W-What the hell is that?!"

The girl suddenly yelled out, cutting Yukari off.

Shock crept into her voice as she began to mutter to herself.

"... P-Plastic models? No... that's impossible... plastic models wouldn't... so what the hell is that?! This must be some kind of trick! Someone's controlling them with a radio controller, something like that..."

Before I realized it, the rustling sound was now coming from all directions.

The girl screamed.



"Stay away! D-Don't... don't come any closer! What is this... make them stop! Make them stop moving and keep them away from me!"

What in the world was going on? I desperately moved my eyes around.

But, the only part of my body I could move right now were my eyeballs, so I couldn't really check everything around me. All I could do was strain my eyes and ears... and even then, I couldn't really fully trust the information I got from those senses while I was under the influence of this anesthesia here...

Suddenly, the girl turned towards me.

I saw the unmistakable tinge of fear on her face.

Her eyes met mine... and she raised her right arm.

I don't know when she grabbed it, but I could see her gripping onto what looked like a saw with a jagged blade in her hand. For some reason... the blade was already dyed red (and seeing that sent a chill through my body), and I saw that blade coming swinging down at me...

In the next instant, the girl was holding onto her right hand.

Something had hit the saw out from her grip.

The girl almost fell over, but regained her balance and broke out into a run.

She quickly went out from my field of view, but I soon heard the sound of her feet stop while the dry, rustling sound filled the air more and more. Soon, it sounded like it was coming from everywhere.

"Stop! Don't come! Please! Stop them!"

"It's fine. You don't have to be that afraid. No, really, everything's fine, okay? They're not going to do anything that terrible to you."

"... T-This... this can't be happening... w-what the hell is this? What is this?! What the hell are those things?!"

"..... I can't really say for sure how you see them through your eyes, but these are all my friends. So please, just calm down?"



"F-Friends? What the hell does that mean?! W-What are you?! Y-You-"

What in the world was happening? I moved my eyes all around, trying to catch a glimpse of the scene.

And then, something crept into the corner of my field of vision.

A black shadow was approaching.

Something was taking a good long look at my face.

For a second, I thought that girl had come back, but there was way too much of a size difference.

No, it was more like I was looking at a dwarf or a fairy.

I squinted my eyes, trying to get a better look.

My brain wasn't really cooperating right now, but even so I wanted to take a look.

And so, I got a good look at *that*.

That was something that quite resembled the plastic models I've seen at Yukari's house.

The 1/144 scale, plastic model robots that decorated the garden and fences and various other places at Yukari's home.

But, it was impossible for *that* to actually be a plastic model. The parts that made up its body just looked way too alive. Its skin looked like skin of a living creature, and from how it looked there was no way this thing wasn't alive. And if this really was a plastic model robot, there'd be no way it would be peeking down at my face with a look of worry in its eyes and tapping me on the cheek. So this thing can't have been a plastic model, but this entire situation was also impossible, so... ahh, I understand now.

My brain grew hazy even as screaming floated to my ears from the distance.

This must be a hallucination.

A delusion brought on by the anesthesia.



That home-made anesthesia or whatever had made my brain all fuzzy, so now I was seeing all these ridiculous things, and oh, what ridiculous things they were. Yes, this wasn't reality...

I must be dreaming.

Well, then I had to wake up right away. I don't know how much of this had been a dream, but I had to wake up and save Yukari...

And then, I felt my consciousness blurring again...



It seemed I had fainted.

How long had I been out? A few seconds? Hours? I squinted and tried to take stock of my surroundings, but I just found myself staring at the same ceiling.

However, I seemed to be alone.

Those small shadows had also disappeared.

But I heard Yukari's voice coming from somewhere.

"Have you heard people say this? Whether something is good or bad is up to the one with the remote control. So, that means robots themselves aren't bad, right? And I don't think you're bad either, of course. What's bad is whoever has the remote... in this case, the programme-... no, maybe a bug?"

The girl's voice followed Yukari's.

"W-What are you going on and on about?! Also, w-what the hell is this?! W-Why *don't I hurt*? Why *isn't there any blood*? I'm like this, but *why can I still talk*?! ... W-Wait, just wait a little. What are you planning to do with that?"

"Calm down? Don't be afraid. I'm going to use this to make just a small fix to that bug inside you... everything will be fine. This is my first time trying something like this, but I'm sure it'll go well, so no need to worry. No need to be afraid. Look, it won't hurt at all--"



"H-Hey, stop you idiot! Something like that isn't supposed to go somewhere like that! S-S-Stop, stop, stotototototoTOTOTotototototoToToTototottotoototototo--"

"You, be quiet for a bit."

And then, the girl's voice suddenly cut out.

And my own consciousness once again lost itself in the darkness...



The next time my eyes opened, I found my head resting on Yukari's lap for some reason.

Yukari had placed my head on her knees and was holding the mannequin arm in both her hands. She took a good look at it, tilting her head to the side.

"Wah. What should I do... the damage is getting worse. Wah. Wah. I don't think I can use that here either..."

She suddenly looked down and we made eye contact.

Yukari's eyes widened and for some reason she hid the mannequin arm behind her back and smiled at me.

"Wah, wah... umm... you'll be fine, Gaku-chan. You'll definitely be fine. I'll make you all better. Yeah, this is actually the second time I've done this, and this is way easier than that time with Ten-chan. So just relax and sleep, okay?"

Yukari's hand softly reached out and gently closed my eyelids.

I suddenly was enveloped by darkness, and I found I could no longer open my eyes with my own strength.

... Mmm, didn't that girl say something about how I shouldn't go to sleep?



I'm sure she had said something about the anesthesia and how if I slept again I wouldn't be able to wake up... remembering that, I tried to communicate this to Yukari, but I couldn't put any strength into my eyes or my mouth. I got the feeling that someone was stroking me on the head, and I couldn't fight against the overwhelming sense of sleepiness that overcame me.

My consciousness weakened bit by bit.

I was being sucked into the darkness.

And right before my consciousness completely faded...

"... Is Gaku-chan going to get angry at me like Ten-chan? Maybe she'll hate me after this too... I really really don't want that. That would hurt so much... but, I guess, I mean..."

Gaku-chan is my precious friend.

I could've sworn I heard someone saying something like that.



Maybe it had really just been a bluff, or maybe everything had really been a dream. Either way, what the girl had been saying about not being able to wake up again appeared to have been a lie.

When I came to, I was in my own bed.

I checked the clock, and saw that it was nighttime.

I asked my family, and they told me that I had come home right afternoon, complaining that I wasn't feeling well, and I had dove underneath my covers right after that. I didn't remember doing any of that though...

According to my grandmother, a middle-aged man had visited the house while I had been sleeping.

He had told my grandmother that he was a detective, but once he heard that I was sleeping he just went away.



All he left was a verbal message that the culprit in the Tokyo Dismemberment Murder had given herself up and that there wasn't anything left to worry about.

My grandmother had found it rather strange that he came all the way here to tell me something like that, but I just fed her a random excuse and skirted the issue.

And right now... I was sitting on my bed and staring at my left hand.

All the while I was remembering back to that mannequin arm, a memory that still existed within my hazy mind.

I gripped my hand into a fist, and then let it relax.

It felt completely normal.

Of course, there wasn't any sign that my left arm had been severed nor any sign that it had been reattached.

In that case... yeah, I must've been overthinking it.

That must've been a dream all along.

I heard my cell phone ring.

I had only gotten that phone recently, so the only person who I had a ringtone set up for was Yukari (to be honest, I was pretty bad with machines, so she was the one who had set up the ringtone in the first place). I stiffened... and with a whole lot of courage, I answered the call.

Nothing strange happened, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

I was calmed even further when I heard Yukari's pleasant voice on the other end right after I picked up the phone.

"..... Hello? Gaku-chan?"



Arc 1: Various Notes on Marii

"Yeah, I'm here. Yukari... Yukari? Are you okay? You're not hurt or anything right?"

"Eh? Wah, wah, what do you mean? Of course I'm fine... but Gaku-chan, are *you* okay? I mean, uhh... there's not any reason really I'm asking this, but umm... your left hand, for example... is that okay?"

"Yeah. Everything's fine."

I heard a huge, full-bodied sigh of relief coming from the other end of the call. Hm?

Yukari was supposed to be smarter than I was, but she had some pretty airheaded parts to her too.

Yukari spoke timidly.

"..... By the way, Gaku-chan... about today... do you remember anything?"

"Nah, my mind's a blank. I think I came back home after lunch and I've been sleeping the entire day, but I can't remember anything. I get the feeling I had a pretty awful nightmare though..."

"Really? Mm, I see... okay, that's great!"

""That's great?' Are you even listening? I just told you that not only can I not remember anything, but I had a nightmare."

"Wah. Umm... well, Gaku-chan, I think you should just sleep well tonight. A good night's sleep and those nightmares will just vanish. Maybe you shouldn't look at your left hand until tomorrow either... well, anyways, take care of yourse-"

Yukari started to end the call, but I held her back.

I casually led into my next question.

"Hey, wait a moment. Before that... there's something I want to ask you."

"..... What is it?"



"Well, it's just... my cell phone, it's *nowhere to be found*. You wouldn't happen to know where it is, would you?"

A short silence later...

"... Cell phone? W-Who knows? Must be somewhere... I guess? Wah, wah, umm... I wonder where it is...?"

Yukari sounded quite flustered, and I let out a huge sigh at hearing her still trying to fool me.

"Can't you cut it out and just accept it? Marii Yukari! I remember everything, alright? I mean, it's night already, but I think we should meet today... let's talk?"

"..... Okay."

"Okay then. Let's umm... right. Let's meet in front of the school then."

I checked that Yukari had hung up and ended the call.

And then I moved my left hand away from my ear and stared at it again.

I could see the current time faintly glowing through my skin before the luminescence eventually vanished.

My hand now looked no different from a normal hand.

No matter how I looked at it, through my eyes it looked like nothing but a normal hand.

There were no traces that would suggest it had rung like a phone or displayed the time just a minute ago.

I changed out of my shirt, which was damp with sweat, and headed for the school.

Yukari arrived before I did.





“..... So then, Ten-chan fell off the jungle gym.”

Nighttime had fallen on our school grounds. Yukari and I were lined up side by side and sitting down in front of our locked school gate.

Yukari’s words came out slowly, haltingly.

She told me how in the past, Tenjou and her were playing alone on a jungle gym that was scheduled to be torn down.

And about how Tenjou’s hands slipped and she fell into the middle of the jungle gym.

And then the jungle gym, which was already so close to being demolished, completely collapsed right on top of Tenjou.

“And Ten-chan’s body was just in this terrible, terrible condition... and I knew if I just left her she would *stop moving forever*. So I tried my best and rebuilt Ten-chan. It was my first time trying something like that, but I just kept on believing and believing and believing that I could. I told myself... I could do this. This wasn’t anything different from making plastic models. Wasn’t any different from fixing electronics. And after I built up all the parts and replaced all the things that were broken, I ended up *repairing* Ten-chan.”

“..... So you did it like how you used my cell phone to heal my hand?”

“..... Yeah. I used the jungle gym.”

“Ah.” I exhaled and looked at my left hand.

It was already plenty shocking that I had almost lost a hand and Yukari had healed me (and what’s more, she used a cell phone, not bandages).¹

So I wondered how shocked Tenjou must’ve been to have been on the brink of death and to have had her body rebuilt with a jungle gym.

1 A bit of wordplay here: bandages is “houtai,” and cell phone is “keitai,” with the kanji for “tai” being the same.



How traumatic that must've been to a young girl...

"And Tenjou... she knew about all this?"

"Yeah. Actually... I was so focused on fixing her that I completely forgot to put her to sleep... so umm... Ten-chan saw everything... from start to finish..."

"Ahh... I guess when you mention that, it's kinda hard to put all the blame on Tenjou..."

Sure, Yukari might've saved her life, but those circumstances were a bit...

"So... what about Gaku-chan?"

Yukari's serious tone got me to turn to look at her, and I saw her giving me an equally serious look.

"Eh?"

"What about Gaku-chan? Are you angry at me? Do you think I'm gross? You went through so much all because of me... you were terrified, and there's also your left hand, and, umm, also the other parts..."

"O-Other parts?"

"..... So, does Gaku-chan hate me now?"

Her purple eyes stared right into my face.

Ahh, her eyes... they were really pretty.

I could feel myself getting sucked into those eyes... and hell, I almost wanted to be...

I unconsciously averted my gaze and looked down at my left arm again.

There were no visible wounds, no seams... it looked perfectly like a normal arm.



But, that was because I was looking at my arm through my eyes.

Yukari saw things differently.

Just like how Yukari sees humans as robots, I couldn't see humans as anything other than humans. In other words, the cell phone that had been swapped into my body to replace some damaged parts had become part of me, and I no longer could perceive it anymore. Just like the class president's sensors, or Shou-chan's Vernier Thrusters, or Kasoku's drill, I can't sense the cell phone that was supposed to have been used for my left hand.

Yes... just as Tenjou had said, I really didn't understand.

It wasn't that Yukari and I just had different ways of looking at things.

No, the things we were looking at, those things were also different.

I looked down and saw what just looked like an arm connected to my body and made of organic matter, but Yukari saw parts. She saw joints and seams and armor, but it wasn't that things just looked that way to her... those things were in fact real to her. They didn't just seem that way, but those parts could be touched, had functions that could be checked... and that was precisely why Yukari saw them like that. The forms she could see actually had meaning, and Yukari was fully aware of that.

So, she could fix things.

She could mend and rebuild things.

Such feats were impossible for people like us who couldn't see the things she could, but to Yukari and her purple eyes, *those things were like that.*

Even if we were looking at the same apple, Yukari and I were seeing different things.

I knew that. But, I only knew it, and in fact I really didn't understand how Yukari saw things. At the same time, Yukari really didn't understand how I saw things.



Neither of us could escape from the worlds that were presented to us, and neither of us could enter into the worlds of the other.

I couldn't see what Yukari saw.

And Yukari couldn't see what I saw.

We lived on two parallel lines, never meant to cross no matter how long we waited and how far we walked.

"..... Gaku... chan."

The helplessness in Yukari's voice brought me back to myself and I met her gaze.

Seeing her eyes quivering in uncertainty, I silently apologized to her for leaving her alone and spoke.

"..... I'm not too sure what I look like in Yukari's eyes, but... I do know how things look like to me, through my own eyes."

"Eh?"

"To me, Yukari looks like *a friend*."

I heard Yukari inhale and I chuckled.

"Come on, don't be that surprised. It's obvious, isn't it? You're the one who said it. I'm an all-purpose model with amazing adaptability, right? So I'll be fine. As if I'd hate you just because of something like this. Yeah, sure, I might've been broken, but you fixed me so it's not like I have a right to complain... I think Tenjou understands all this too, but she just can't come to terms with it.

To me, you're a friend.

So... if in your eyes I also look like a friend... I don't care if I look like a robot or whatever, but that makes me pretty happy, I guess."

"... Gaku-chan."

Yukari seemed overcome with emotion and threw her arms around me. I pat her head and fell into thought.



Certainly, I couldn't really see the same things that Yukari could.

But, that didn't only apply to Yukari - whether it was Tenjou, or my parents, or any other humans who had the same eyes as me, that was still the case. In the end, that's just how humans were built. For example, even if we had the same eyes, I couldn't really describe what made a red apple seem red to anybody else, and I couldn't truly understand what redness meant to other people either. Humans were existences that were never meant to intersect.

However, we could at least share the experience through our understanding that what we were looking at was the color of an apple.

Even if we couldn't prove that we felt the same kinds of things... I could have faith that this was true.

Yes, Yukari and I were like two parallel lines.

If we just let those lines be, then they never had any hope of crossing. And that is why we had to reach out to each other. That is why we had to draw each other close. If we didn't do that, our parallel lines would never approach each other. If left alone, we would never cross... and so I knew I had to take it upon myself to reach out, and so I wanted her to reach out to me as well, and prayed that we could get closer.

As those out-of-character thoughts floated through my head, I looked down at Yukari, who was clinging to me and now shedding tears, and I hugged her right back with all my might.

We might see the world differently, but as long as we felt the same things, then I could have faith.

Have faith that even if by only a little, my feelings could get across to you.



Marii Yukari saw people as robots.

This was the one absolute about her that nobody could ever change.

But even then I was her friend.

This may seem obvious, but every story has a *beginning*, and if you wanted to bring a story to a close then you had to start telling it from the beginning.

Even so, where exactly should I begin?

This story is about me, Hatou Manabu, and a certain event that happened - or perhaps it was about my entire life? (In fact, I do humbly apologize to those who might've been hoping that my cute friend Marii Yukari would be the protagonist of this story and not me, but alas I am indeed the main character here. Of course, she does play an important role in this story, but once again I really do offer my most heartfelt of apologies...) And, because I have the leading role in this story, maybe it's better if everyone tried to get to know a bit more about me? In that case, maybe I should start from my birth? From the time I was physically, or maybe emotionally, given form on this plane? Or maybe I should start from when the concept of "me" first factored into the universe?

Please tell us she's kidding.

If she starts from there, how long will we be here reading this story?

Of course, if you really wanted, I could begin from all the way back then. If you felt like it, I could even start from the day my mother and her new groom made me (in that case, the tale would begin under the shade of a tree behind our dojo in the middle of a summer afternoon fifteen years ago).



If you further wished, I could start from when my two parents met, or even when they were both born, or even start with some stories about my grandparents' ancestors... *Just trust me. I could do this.* I just don't really particularly want to.

I could go back as far as you wanted. But that was precisely why I had to put my foot down and make a decision.

I had to break the thread of fate at some point and mark the *beginning* to this story.

And so, let us return to the original question.

Exactly when does a story begin?

Does a story begin when a situation develops which befits a story?

Or is a story born from the moment someone makes a decision to tell it?

If we unravel the chain, then one could say such a situation developed right after *her* death.

She transferred out of our school, and because of that she met her demise.

Pushing further, *she* - Marii Yukari - had transferred out of our school because a certain other girl had come to study abroad here.

So, should I start telling the story from there?

Or, maybe I should start telling the story from a certain phone call I received on a night after I had been relentlessly questioned by this blonde-haired girl from abroad?

The call was from someone that couldn't possibly be calling me, and it also foretold of events to come.

So, maybe I really should start from there...

No. No, I really do want to begin this story from *that day*.

Yes, I might be here asking you about where I should start this story from, but the truth is that I've already decided. The day Yukari and I first met... that day might not have any direct connection with the events to come, but I wanted to believe that that day was the start of everything. It was a very important day for me - I really do apologize for being so roundabout with all this, but this is my story, so please just let me tell it how I want. I mean, it's not like it's that important of a story anyways - and at any rate I'm going to probably just end it like this: "And it turned out everything was a dream. Tadaa~~."

So, just as I wanted, I'm going to start this story like this:

This story begins on the day I met a girl named Marii Yukari: a girl who claimed she saw all living beings other than herself as robots.

Or, if I want to be a bit more dramatic:

This story begins from my first kiss.



When it was roughly halfway through a new school semester, Yukari and I met around a corner in one of the long hallways at the school we both attended.

To be precise, we had seen each other a few times before that already.

I mean, we both lived in the same town and had attended the same elementary school, and when we entered junior high we were placed in the same class. So you could say I was already acquainted with her, and to be honest I knew her name and face from the first day of junior high.

She just had a face and figure that attracted attention, and I'm not saying that now just because I'm her friend.

I wouldn't call her "beautiful," but she would certainly do the phrase "pretty girl" plenty of justice, even if "pretty girl" is such an awkward phrase nowadays for all parties involved. Sure, there was the fact that she had been in elementary school until not too long ago, but Marii Yukari still looked surprisingly young, and it was impossible not to turn your head when she walked around wearing that obviously brand-new uniform that was just a bit too large for her. That first day of school was the first time I've ever looked at another human being and felt that I was looking at some kind of small animal... and that made it all the more obvious how I was now a junior high student who lived worlds apart from this small animal. Indeed, I was antisocial, curt, and because I had practiced the *naginata* since childhood, I had



developed quite masculine muscles as well as hardened soles on my feet (in fact, I had yet to lose an arm wrestling match with a boy my age).

I had never once thought of myself as “cute” in any way.

Perhaps because I thought of myself that way, I never really tried to approach Marii Yukari even though I remembered her name and face from that very first day.

A tomboy like me would never have anything to talk about with a girly girl like her, I thought.

In all truth, I didn’t only think of Yukari like this, but treated all my other classmates similarly, never trying to get close to anyone, never trying very hard to fit into the class. Right when the school year began, I was granted the title of “the lone stranger that you could rely on if it came down to it” (although at some point after I got to know Yukari, that title was swept away). And so, both I and my surroundings managed to draw clear boundaries that mutually separated the two of us from each other.

And I was perfectly happy with that.

A few people I knew from elementary school were still around, so I didn’t really find my school life very lacking - I had people to talk to during breaks, and during lunchtimes and gym class when there was a need to operate in groups I could always find one. I really didn’t need any friends past that.

Well, I wouldn’t say I had no interest in other people... or that I was disillusioned with the idea of having friends or anything (actually, I was the type who got easily fired up, which is why I’m telling the story like this in the first place), but for now let’s just say I was a child but the kind of child who didn’t want to be seen as a child. I was a junior high student now, and seeing all my friends from before dressed up in their uniforms¹ just made me think about how different they all looked from when they were in elementary school, and how much more mature they seemed, and how I really wanted to be seen that way by others as well. I wanted to act like a grown-up girl.

¹ In Japan, it’s not customary for elementary school students to have uniforms, but you do when you enter junior high.



But then, I was dull and had no real skills outside of the naginata, so I thought I had to cover all this up by just not talking as much. That would be for the best - instead of people thinking I was completely incapable of acting like a girl, I would rather people just think I wasn't interested in that kind of thing.

My pride existed to satisfy myself and only myself, and I worked hard to protect that pride by playing the character that everyone else expected of me.

Because of that, I didn't imagine that my and Yukari's worlds would ever intersect.

At her core, Hatou Manabu was a girl who had no interest in cute things, or any desire to become cute herself.

However, in the end, it was precisely the way I carried myself that got Yukari so alarmed.

To put it more clearly... well, this might sound like a bad joke when I say it, but because of those special purple eyes of hers, and because I never tried to act like a girl, it seemed that Yukari honestly couldn't tell if I was a boy or a girl.

And because she didn't want to say anything rude to me in the future, she became determined to quickly figure this out (whether I was a girl or a boy, I mean), and to that end she started following me around.

By the way, I should mention that because of my affinities for dojos (or maybe it was just a part of my personality), I tended to move around quite quickly.

When I walked around it was at quite a brisk pace, probably twice that of a normal person.

It got to the point where often when I had a friend walking along with me, I would suddenly find that I had left her behind.

On the other hand, Yukari was quite small.

Which meant the length of her stride was quite short.



She might be able to move her limbs quickly, but she wasn't covering much distance.

So, her version of stalking consisted of running after me with little steps, hiding somewhere, checking that I hadn't noticed her, and then running after me again to close the distance that had opened up between us. Yes, it was all quite cute, but I want you to imagine something: if you were following someone by hiding and running, hiding and running, hiding and running, what would you do once your target turned a corner?

Seeing that I had disappeared around a corner, Yukari quickly broke out into a run.

But in the next moment, I realized I had forgotten something, and turned myself around.

Everything after that honestly happened in the span of a mere second.

Turning the corner again, I noticed that someone was barreling straight for me.

I unconsciously bent my knees and readied myself.

Yukari and I made brief eye contact at point blank range.

Her purple eyes opened wide, but she couldn't stop and just smashed right into me. But even though she couldn't stop, that didn't mean she didn't try to avoid me, and she ended up twisting her body completely out of sorts. Meanwhile, I reflexively reached out and caught her. This was really reckless of me. I mean, it turns out that all those "don't run in the hallway!" warnings they issue at all the schools weren't just some dull cliché, but they actually were trying to warn us of real danger. And now I had the pleasure of experiencing that danger firsthand. Yukari might've had a pretty light build, but her running start had made the situation all the more dangerous; she had probably broken into a full sprint the minute she lost sight of me, and I had unconsciously lowered my center of gravity to prepare to take the force of her body colliding into mine while protecting her from harm, which led her to fall on top of me in spectacular fashion.





I found myself pushed to the ground.

I had no idea what god in heaven was trying to play a prank on me, but our lips had fallen right on top of each other's.

... Exactly how long did we spend in that position?
I don't think it was actually that long.

After all, I never felt her breath on my face before we separated.

But it still felt like an eternity. I had one hand on Yukari's bottom, and my other hand was firmly on the floor to brace myself from the fall. Inside, I was calmly freaking out. On one hand, I couldn't stop my heart from beating out my chest, but on the other hand I was calm enough to enjoy the feeling. I had forgotten to even breathe, but I allowed myself to have my fill of the comforting lightness and warmth I felt coming from Yukari's body through her uniform. I had been pushed to the ground and had my lips stolen by another girl in our school hallway, and I should've been deathly afraid of being seen in this position, but the thought never crossed my mind and instead I felt that we were the only two people in the entire world. I patiently waited for time to start moving again.

I found myself staring again at Yukari's eyes.

Purple is such a pretty color, I thought.

Exactly how long did I stay like that, staring at her?

And then, perhaps the dryness in the air was getting to me, but I felt my tongue darting out of my mouth to lick my lips. Together with the lips that were right on top of mine.

At that moment, the top half of Yukari's body snapped off mine.

Her weight was now all concentrated at my midsection, and I let out a groan. Perhaps Yukari heard me, but she hurriedly got off my body.

Wah, wah, wah, I heard her stammering, before her stammers slowly turned into words.



“Wah, wah, wah, umm... no, you’ve got it wrong! I’m... umm... I’m sorry! I... Hatou... san... I didn’t know you were going to turn back around, and-”

“... Wait just a second. Does that mean this wasn’t just a pure accident, and you were actually following me?”

“Wah? Umm, no no, that’s... well, it’s not like I really wanted anything from you, or... well, no, I did want something, but... umm... it was something personal, and I didn’t really want to bother Hatou-san with it, and... well, I just wanted to make sure I didn’t end up saying something rude in the future, you know? I just wanted to make sure whether Hatou-san was a girl or a boy, so I was trying to be a bit sneaky-”

“... Wait, you can’t tell I’m a girl? Do you think guys would wear a skirt like this? And that’s why you suddenly kissed me?”

“Wah! No no no! It’s not like you don’t look like a girl, umm, well, I just wanted to check you were a girl, and, umm... so, that means Hatou-san really is a girl, right? ... Wah, wait, no, that’s not what I meant... umm, I also didn’t mean to kiss you, it’s just... sorry, I’m uhh... wah, wah, wah...”

Well, I knew she didn’t kiss me on purpose, so I just wanted to tease her a bit. But now she was starting to cry, so I set about trying to calm her down now. And in the process of doing so I learned about her special eyes.

Through Marii Yukari’s purple eyes, all living things other than herself looked like robots.

In other words, I also looked like a robot to her, and because my name was Manabu (also, she was deliberately skirting this issue a bit, but there was also the way I carried myself), she couldn’t really tell if I really was a girl or not and was trying to make sure.

Of course, it’s not like I believed her right after she told me that.

Not only was her story just purely impossible to believe, but with something as subjective as how people saw things, one could make up any number of fantastic stories.



So, at that point, I just concluded that Marii Yukari was one of those “strange people” - the ones who claim to be aliens from outer space or people who can see fairies. I ended up humoring her and pretending to believe her and promising to make our run-in with each other our own little secret. And thus ended that particular event.

But, after that I couldn’t really get what Yukari said out of my head, and when I observed her I certainly did see some strange points about how she behaved from day to day.

Points that made me really think that she saw everyone else as a robot.

Points that she would desperately try to cover up, trying her best to keep herself from being found out.

If she really was one of those typical “strange people,” why would she be trying to hide her strangeness from others?

If I thought about those idols on TV who acted like “strange people,” they insisted on continuing to act strange openly even though they knew perfectly well that what they were doing wasn’t normal (rather, if they tried to hide it, nobody would call them “strange” anymore).

But Yukari didn’t seem to want to be known as strange; she just wanted to be normal, and exhausted every effort to make herself seem that way.

She desperately just wanted to be a normal human being.

Those desires of hers were all too obvious after I learned about her eyes, and so when I saw Yukari try to act normal but get herself backed into a corner instead, I couldn’t just look away regardless of whether or not I believed her about her eyes. So whenever Yukari got into a jam - whether that be in art class or at a swimming lesson - I couldn’t help but back her up, and we ended up spending more and more time together like that. Yukari was also a lot more open around me now (maybe because she had already told me her secret?) so she began to depend on me, began to hang around me a lot, and before I knew it we had grown quite close.

That was how I met Marii Yukari.



I actually once asked Yukari as well - how did she feel during our rather violent first meeting? Or should I say, during our first kiss?

Yukari answered me. She told me that her head had just gone completely white, and she really didn't have any free time to feel anything.

She wasn't just being shy; I believed that's what really happened.

To be honest, even though that had been my first kiss, it's not like the kiss itself left much of an impression on me.

I didn't really remember if Yukari's lips were very soft, even if people often said that about their first kisses.

No, what I remembered wasn't the feeling of Yukari's lips, but the sensation and warmth of her body atop mine.

It had felt like Yukari and I were the only people left in the world.

That was the sensation of my first meeting with Yukari.

And that was the beginning of my story.



By the way, have you ever heard the word “qualia”?

It’s sometimes explained as the “nature of feeling,” and in short, it refers to the sensation born in your head when you feel something. The *feeling* of “red” when you see something red, the *feeling* of blue, or of purple... people might be looking at the same color, but depending on their circumstances they might interpret that color in various ways. That *feeling* is referred to as “qualia.”

Of course, this definition extends beyond purely visual stimuli like red or blue.

For sound, touch, smell as well... all the subjective experiences born from the five senses, and all *sensations* in general, had associated qualia.

For instance, even pain had qualia.

When we got hurt, we felt pain. Yes, it is understood that this was a defense mechanism that alerted our bodies to danger. And because of that, there were also various types of pain.

But, exactly why did pain *feel the way it did*?

When your wounded area felt hot or cold, felt tight or had aches, those feelings were qualia of pain. And if those qualia caused you to feel sadness, or annoyance, or maybe happiness, then those feelings would again be another set of qualia.



Qualia also weren't limited to instantaneous feelings like that, and for example you could watch a movie one day and feel happy or sad the entire day, or you could feel your blood boil in fury and just lose yourself in the reverberations of that feeling, and those reverberations would also count as qualia.

The person who taught me about the concept of qualia was one of the few people who knew of Yukari's sight, and one of only two people who had experienced that sight for herself: the honors student from the class next door, Tenjou Nanami.

Nanami had a long history with Yukari, and we would have to go all the way back to kindergarten to trace that history back to its beginning.

As a child, Yukari didn't smile at all.

In fact, she couldn't even will herself to express emotions on her face.

After all, all the other humans looked like robots to Yukari.

And robots normally didn't express any emotions.

At the very least, they couldn't display the bountiful range of diverse emotions that humans had access to.

In other words, Yukari had never seen a human's "facial expression" before. When she said she didn't know if I was a boy or a girl, she wasn't just pulling my leg. She honestly did not understand how to tie facial expressions to subtle changes in someone's emotional state. In fact, she didn't even appreciate that the concept of a "facial expression" could exist in the first place.

Did dogs and cats have emotions? Did they have facial expressions that could express those emotions?

If you were a pet owner, then you'd probably have an instant answer to that. You'd tell me immediately that of course cats and dogs have emotions. And if you've spent a particularly long time with a pet, you could probably read that pet's emotions from his face. If you put a lot of love and a lot of time into a relationship with that dog, then even if it didn't come growling and baring its teeth, even if it didn't start



waving its tail back and forth, you might be able to read your dog's emotions from his "facial expression."

But, if you just were shown a dog or cat that you had never seen before, then you probably would have a lot of trouble distinguishing the nuances in the animal's facial expression.

In a similar fashion, Yukari couldn't understand human facial expressions.

If she was around someone for a long time, then just like a cat or a dog, Yukari would be able to guess what someone was feeling based on their facial expression, but if it was someone she was meeting for the first time, someone who she hadn't known for a long time, then she wouldn't be able to judge whether that person was laughing or scowling, whether that person was happy or sad. That was the world Yukari was living in with her purple eyes, and that made Yukari appreciate her friends all the more. Tenjou Nanami was not only the first friend Yukari managed to make, but also the one who, once she figured out that Yukari didn't understand the concept of facial expressions, took it upon herself to teach Yukari how to express her emotions.

Yukari might not be able to make any facial expressions, but of course that didn't mean she didn't have any emotions.

She just couldn't express any of them properly.

Even though Nanami was only a child, she exhausted every idea to try and teach Yukari to smile. She would pinch Yukari's hand, telling her that her face was making the expression for "sad" at that moment, or steal Yukari's lunch, telling her that her face was making the expression for "angry" then. Or she would whack Yukari and make her express surprise, or tickle her, or feed her sweet treats, or watch a movie with her, or go to the zoo with her. Every time an emotion appeared on Yukari's face, Nanami would draw that face down or make Yukari look in a mirror. "You probably didn't even mean to, but that look on your face right now is called an 'expression,'" she would say. "And that 'expression' is by far the best way to tell someone else how you're feeling right now."



Like that, after constant supervision and coaching from Nanami, Yukari finally became able to express her emotions. And oh, what frank, sincere, bountiful emotions they were, to the point where I almost got embarrassed in her presence. And... this might frustrate me to no end to admit, but I have to acknowledge that Nanami deserved the credit for all this.

Until the accident, Nanami and Yukari were best friends.

After the accident, Nanami grew distant and also began to treat Yukari cruelly, taking every opportunity to block Yukari at every step.

However... no matter how much Nanami bullied Yukari, Yukari would still call Nanami her friend, and still continued to wish that they could get along again.

That might've been because her eyes - eyes which were useless for seeing human expression but in return were sharp when it came to reading a situation - allowed Yukari to use the experiences she had cultivated through her long relationship with Nanami to see through Nanami's hostile exterior and understand her complicated state of mind underneath.

And no matter how much Nanami might've hated Yukari from the bottom of her heart (and I truly believed a part of her did feel that way), she was still the one who had taught Yukari how to laugh. For that alone, Yukari would never quit considering herself as Nanami's friend.



Tenjou Nanami had taught me all about "qualia."

She also taught me about a lot of other difficult-sounding concepts - philosophical zombies, inverted qualia, etc. Keep in mind that around that time we had both just started junior high, and Nanami was probably just repeating things she read in a book or saw online, so it was really suspect whether we were talking about these things in the right way or not (for example, at one point Nanami told me that qualia is an "emergent phenomenon," and then at another point she said that qualia is not "emergent." I pointed out to her that she had just contradicted what she said before, but without a single hint of shame on her face she responded that contradictions like this weren't



uncommon at all considering science was rapidly advancing each and every day. And all this discussion took place even though I didn't really know what an "emergent phenomenon" was in the first place). But even if we didn't know what we were talking about, Nanami's desire to learn more about these kinds of things was absolutely sincere, and I was also curious about these topics. So even though we were still children, we just continued discussing these things in our own way.

When it came to explaining "qualia," Nanami had this to say:

"To put it simply, qualia is embodied by the phrase 'a picture is worth a thousand words,' I think."

"'A picture is worth a thousand words'? That idiom?"

"Yes. So, for instance, no matter how much you think you know about the color red, there are things you just can't understand about it until you see it in reality. Conversely, if someone has never seen the color red, then no matter how much they might know about it they can't ever say they know what red is. You follow? They can hear thousands of words about what red is without ever being able to understand it, but one look at something red and they do. I think that 'one look' is precisely what qualia is... although, it's not like I really understand what that 'one look' is at a fundamental level."

Even if we didn't really know what we were talking about, we often got into very serious discussions like this.

We just couldn't stop ourselves.

One time, we also discussed the concepts of "quanta" and "Schrödinger's Cat."

"Hatou, do you know what a 'quantum' is?"

"Like, electrons or molecules... they're sorta the smallest unit for things, right?"



"Yes. Humans, planets, everything in this universe are made from quanta. And, those quanta possess both properties of *particles* and of *waves*... did you know that? In short, these quanta both possess physical form and yet can be also considered a type of formless energy. And because they are waves, they don't live completely in the concrete world, but exist more in the realm of probability. At their core, quanta are represented by probability densities."

"Probability... densities...?"

"Yes, something that tells us whether the probability of a quantum existing in a certain state is high or low. Did you know that until they are observed, quanta don't exist in any definite state? It's not that we just don't know what state they're in, but rather that this state really hasn't been decided. But the minute they're observed, their existence also becomes definite. Until they are observed, we have no choice but to think of their existence in terms of probabilities... that is the nature of quanta."

This might all sound pretty strange, but this isn't science fiction; this is actually how scientists think reality works. Until you observe a quantum, you don't know its state... and our bodies are composed of many, many of these quanta."

"..... Hmm, I see."

It's not like I could relate to any of this, so I couldn't really come up with anything but a half-assed response. Still, Nanami didn't seem discouraged and just continued.

"So, Hatou, have you heard of 'Schrödinger's Cat'? It's a famous thought experiment."

"... Umm... I have a feeling that I've heard of that somewhere... but maybe not..."

"To put it simply, there's a box with a switch on it and if someone pushes that switch, it releases a lethal poison gas into the box. We put a cat into the box. So, is the cat alive or dead?"

I had no idea where this was going, so I gave a hesitant answer.



“Umm, until someone pushes the button... the cat’s alive... but after someone pushes the button it’s dead?”

“Yes, that would be what normal logic would lead us to believe. However, for this thought experiment, the agent pushing the switch isn’t a ‘person,’ but rather a quantum system. In other words, there’s some kind of machine that can detect quanta, and if it detects a quantum the switch is pushed, but if it doesn’t the switch is not.

However, quanta are probabilistic entities, so we can’t really be certain whether there is a quantum there or not until we observe it.

That means that, because the on-off state of this switch is controlled by a quantum system, that state itself is probabilistic until we observe it. Until we open the box and check inside, that switch behaves just like the quanta that control it and is simultaneously in a state of being pushed and not pushed with some probabilities assigned to each. Consequently, because that switch determines whether the cat is alive or dead, the cat behaves just like the switch and quantum system and is both alive and dead simultaneously with some probability. Do you see what I’m trying to say?”

“Ummm...”

“Let me try to summarize the point this thought experiment is trying to make. Quanta are strange things with strange properties. However, one might think those properties only apply to the microscopic world quanta live in, and do not apply to the macroscopic - the real - world. But what I’m trying to say is that this is a huge misconception! Just like this quantum system is linked with this switch, and the switch is linked with the life or death of this cat, it would be utterly strange if the strange things that occur in the microscopic world did not also extend to the macroscopic one. If quanta really behave this way, then until we ourselves are observed, we must exist in a superimposed state of both life and death, in a probabilistic state just like the quanta themselves. That is what the Schrödinger’s Cat experiment is telling us.”

I chewed over Nanami’s words but then couldn’t hold in my surprise.

“Ehh? Wait, but look at us, we’re definitely alive and exist, don’t we?! Not as probabilities, but as concrete, definite things. Like, even if nobody’s looking at us, it’s not like we’re just going to disappear or anything.”



"Are you sure?"

"..... Well..... I mean, that's..."

"Well, to be honest, even Schrödinger was using this thought experiment to make the point you're bringing up. He wanted to point out that it's ridiculous to have a cat that's both alive and dead at the same time, so quanta can't be these uncertain entities we're claiming they are.

However, there were physicists from Copenhagen who disagreed with him.

They believed that quanta were indeed probabilistic, and that the only reason nobody had successfully seen a cat that was in a superimposed state of life or death was because that cat had been a thought experiment, and that if you eliminated problems with heat and vibrations and other external sources of interference and conducted a precise experiment, you could recreate Schrödinger's experiment in reality. And this interpretation is currently widely accepted - people say that Schrödinger himself quit physics during the late part of his life because of this. Well, that's a rumor I heard anyways, but wouldn't that really be something? The author of Schrödinger's Equation, which forms the basis of all quantum mechanics, couldn't even accept his theory's validity himself."

Nanami's lips curved upwards, but I interrupted her before she could continue.

"Wait wait. So are you saying we're all probabilistic beings too? That if those external sources of interference you mentioned weren't there, the minute everyone took their eyes off us we'd suddenly be both alive and dead or something?"

Nanami shrugged.

"Who knows."

"... Huh?"



“Well, nobody really knows, right? All we know is that quantum systems behave probabilistically, but nobody really knows why, or how they got to be like that, or why these phenomena are only observed in the microscopic world. There’s no perfect answer for these questions.

We don’t even really understand what ‘observation’ means for quantum systems. What does it mean exactly when we say that observing a quantum system puts it into a definite state? Scientists call this ‘collapsing the wavefunction,’ by the way.

Take Schrödinger’s Cat, for example. At what point do we consider the cat ‘observed’?

Is it when a human opens the lid of the box and sees the cat inside? Is it when the view of what’s in the box travels up his neurons and reaches his brain? Or does just opening the lid count as observation? Or maybe it’s when the cat itself feels something? Conversely, what if the human who opens the lid of the box was himself in a larger box? What if there was another human outside this larger box, staring at it? And if that human again was in a larger box, and there was a third human outside it all observing that box, exactly when can we say for sure that the cat is alive or dead? Do we have to wait for the outermost human to open his box? In the microscopic world, the strange truth is that quanta exist as both waves and particles. We can even confirm that molecules, which are made up of many quanta, can exhibit quantum-like behavior. We might be able to confirm similar behavior for viruses too. So, why is it that once we get to the macroscopic world, we can’t confirm anything like this anymore? If observation really forces things into a definite state of existence - collapses their wave functions, so to speak - then when, why, and how does that happen? There are many interpretations for all this, but in reality we don’t understand it very well. We just can observe the outcome... but there are people who claim that we’ll never understand how the system arrives at that outcome no matter how much science progresses.”

Long ago, scientists thought that as long as science continues to advance, we’ll eventually understand all the universe’s mysteries.

But modern scientists now refuted that idea.



After all, in the microscopic world, just observing something would apparently change that thing's state. And that small change could have huge, complicated repercussions in the macroscopic world. There was a limit on the things we could understand, and no matter how much science progressed, it was impossible to perfectly predict the weather every single day - at least, that was true under our current scientific framework.

At any rate, Nanami continued.

"We've been talking for quite a while, but I think what I wanted to make clear is the world is not as definite as you might think. So... for example, some people feel that quanta aren't probabilistic, that they aren't forced into a definite state when they're observed, but there are just infinite *parallel worlds* and quanta exhibit their strange, seemingly probabilistic behavior because these infinite parallel worlds interact on a microscopic level."

"..... Parallel worlds?"

"Yes, parallel worlds. Worlds that are almost exactly like this one, but with subtle differences. Quanta interact with the versions of themselves in these parallel worlds and through that interaction behave probabilistically, and they are forced into a definite state when they *lose this ability to interact* with each other. Following this line of reasoning, the cat in the box is definitely either alive or dead from the onset, but there are infinite worlds where the cat is alive and infinite worlds where the cat is dead, and there is a cat that exists in all these worlds. All these cats interact with each other, but each cat can only feel what's going on in its own world.

Can you believe that? This whole parallel worlds business?

This might all sound like science fiction, but it's actually the subject of real scientific research right now.

They call the wave function collapse picture the 'Copenhagen Interpretation,' while the parallel worlds picture is called the 'Many-Worlds Interpretation.' The Many-Worlds Interpretation also ended up forming the basis of quantum computing theory. We really can't be sure which interpretation is the correct one, but both of them are plausible options...



So, it's not science fiction at all. This is how our world works, how our reality works."

For those of you who want to laugh and make fun of us for being junior high students getting in way over their heads talking about things they don't understand, you should see what it feels like to die once. And then to get brought back to life. To have half your broken body fixed using the scraps of a dilapidated jungle gym, or to have your severed left arm healed with parts of a cell phone.

Try going through that, and maybe you'll come to understand a bit how Nanami and I felt.

"... Anyways, this might seem like a bit of a leap in logic, but I was thinking about how Marii's eyes are kind of like this. We all look like robots to her, right? So if we take the Copenhagen Interpretation as true, then you could say that maybe her eyes collapse our wave functions into what she perceives as robots. If you take the Many-Worlds Interpretation as true, then maybe her eyes are just looking at versions of us in another world where we exist as robots. Or, hmm, maybe...

Maybe it's not that qualia is born from what we see, but that qualia itself solidifies what we see into its proper form."

"... That certainly was a sudden leap in logic."

"Well, I agree, but I'm not a scientist, so give me a break. But it's not so far-fetched, is it? When Marii looks at something, like our bodies, that induces change in the microscopic world, or in some other world at some other level, and the thing she's looking at changes itself. We might not be able to see directly what's going on, but quanta aren't really supposed to be visible anyways. For instance, no matter what our bodies are really made of, as long as my own qualia makes me observe my own body as flesh and bone, my body will be forced into that state. In your case, it's like how your left hand is a hand and not a cell phone because you observe it to be so...

Anyways, if we think about it like that, then Marii's 'power' might actually be a pretty natural thing. We just can't perceive what's happening, but what actually is happening is in fact quite normal."

In the past, Tenjou Nanami had been involved in an accident, and was on death's door when Yukari saved her.



In order to save her, Yukari “fixed” her body by using spare parts from a jungle gym.

If Yukari was telling the truth, then that would mean around 40 percent of Nanami’s body was being held together by “steel bones” right now.

Not by the normal materials that made up a human body, but by parts from a jungle gym.

Nanami was only a child then. It wasn’t too much of a surprise that she ended up fearing Yukari, which then turned into hatred.

In general, Nanami and I didn’t like each other very much, and when Yukari was between us we tended to just bicker with each other relentlessly. But when it was just us two, we often talked normally. When a nice breeze was blowing, and the sky above us was clear and blue, and we could just laze around all calm and relaxed, it was almost like Nanami had forgotten I was her sworn enemy and would just lay herself bare to me as she talked at length about philosophy and other things she had learned.

For example, she told me that she was still sometimes jolted awake by nightmares.

That she would sometimes look in the mirror and hallucinate that she wasn’t human.

That she would sometimes fear that in the next instant, her body would start to rust from her metal parts and reveal the “robot” underneath.

In reality, Nanami loved Yukari and thought of her as a precious friend.

Nanami also knew that Yukari only meant well when she saved her life.

But, to her, acknowledging Yukari as a friend now would be equivalent to acknowledging that around half her body was now made from a jungle gym - she knew that without the jungle gym she wouldn’t be alive right now, but if she acknowledged what had happened, could she really still claim to be human? To be the same as she was before?



Both she and Yukari were dealing with feelings that were difficult to describe, and Nanami was desperately trying to come to terms with reality.

She would find information on things that seemed even tangentially relevant - qualia and quantum mechanics, for example - and would study them as well as a junior high student could, in order to try and come to terms with everything.

And while it might be a bit strange for me to be saying this, I did believe I now played a large role in her life.

After that incident when I was attacked and dismembered by a murderer (thinking about it now, that really was a gruesome, awful thing that had happened), Yukari had fixed my body, and while she didn't use a jungle gym, the way she fixed me was pretty similar to what she had done to Nanami. Yukari had used a complete cell phone to fix my left hand, and she had used a jungle gym to fix Nanami's body; through these horrific experiences, Nanami and I had become birds of a feather, two people who both had "illegal parts" in their bodies and who could mutually understand each other's circumstances and states of mind (granted, I think Nanami was much more traumatized by her experience than I was by mine...).

My connection with Nanami had been formed through Yukari, but through me Nanami had begun the healing process in her relationship with Yukari.

When Nanami saw that I had accepted the reality that Yukari had "fixed" me, she also started to be able to deal with her own reality.

Given just a bit of time, Nanami would've definitely been able to get back onto her feet after that entire affair.

She would've become friends with Yukari again, and they would grow just as close as they had been before.

... If only Yukari didn't transfer out from our school.

After the school year ended, Yukari moved overseas, and these talks between me and Nanami grew less and less frequent.



During the next school year, we were placed in the same class, but I felt some sense of guilt somewhere in my heart (and perhaps Nanami did too), so we ended up avoiding each other and generally ignoring each other.

And so, my relationship with Nanami ended right when Yukari moved away.

Actually, in one particular world, I ended up meeting Nanami again at a class reunion.

It was eleven years later, and I was twenty five. In that world, Nanami had somehow become a popular actress (I was working as a freelance writer), so I never imagined I would meet her again, but she ended up attending our class reunion and gave me a warm greeting when she saw me.

Do you still remember me? she asked.

I ended up skipping the after party and inviting Nanami over to my place.

Nanami (who by the way was known by a stage name now, which was written with different kanji) told me she had work the next morning, but she ended up staying the night with me.

I had stayed overnight with Yukari plenty of times, but this was the first time I was doing this with Nanami.

I turned off the light, and we lay there stretched out in my room side by side, and began to talk.

We hadn't seen each other for a long time, and so we started with how our lives were going, and slowly worked our way back up all the way to junior high.

"By the way, Tenjou, didn't you start dating Kasoku during your third year?"

"Uwah, you knew? I was trying to keep that quiet..."

"Yeah, it was pretty obvious, you know... ah, are you sure you want to be here with me? You probably want to see him, right? He definitely was at the reunion."



By the way, I ended up going out with Kasoku *in around exactly the same period* as when Nanami had been going out with him. Of course, I don't mean he was two-timing Nanami or anything - it had been a rather serious one-on-one relationship.

"..... Uh, well... that's..."

Nanami sounded rather embarrassed as she fumbled over her words.

The timing seemed right, so I switched topics.

"By the way..." I started. "Tenjou, do you remember anything about Marii-san?"

Nanami seemed to think for a little bit, before letting out an "ahh!" and nodding.

"Yes! I remember her! There was definitely a Marii Yukari back in junior high, wasn't there? She was a strange one, that girl. And she was really cute too."

Nanami continued on, not a care in the world. It was then that I noticed.

Nanami had already forgotten about Yukari... about the girl I had called Marii.

It was as if everything that had happened was just stuff from the distant past, and Nanami had begun to change her perception of that past... change her memories of what had happened.

Yes, humans tended to change their memories all too easily. They would change them into things that were most convenient for themselves... sometimes in order to protect themselves.

Nanami had "re-observed" her past, so to speak.

She had recreated a past that was more acceptable to herself.



Everything about Yukari's eyes, about Nanami's own body being repaired with a jungle gym... all of that was now just a "joke" played by a "strange girl," and not reality...

I was a bit shocked by this, but I didn't really feel annoyed by it.

I didn't really have a right to get angry here.

Because if there was one person in the world who was in no position to blame Nanami for turning her eyes away from reality and recreating the past in her own interest, it was *me*.

Nanami continued carelessly.

"Actually, that girl didn't come today, did she? Ahh, she transferred out at the end of our second year, right? I wonder what she's been doing these days."

"..... Beats me."

"Now that you mention it, after we got put in the same class we never really hung out, did we? But even though we never talked much back then, isn't it strange we can just lie around here and talk like this now?"

"..... Yeah. I guess it's pretty strange."

It really was.

Back then, I'm sure we could've become good friends.

If only Yukari hadn't moved away.

If only Yukari were still alive.

... I couldn't bring myself to be angry at Nanami for conveniently forgetting about Yukari.

I didn't feel any jealousy, any frustration... actually, I felt quite relieved. That was probably for the best... yes, she was probably happier this way.

In the morning, Nanami wasted no time in heading back.



But just as she was leaving, she hesitated a bit before calling out to me.

“..... Hey, Hatou. Do you think I could call you every once in a while after this? So we can, you know, like today...”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Really? That’s a relief. To be honest, I don’t have anyone I can talk to like this...”

Nanami was showing an openness I would have never expected from her in junior high, and I couldn’t help but give her a strained smile.

“Oh my, a rising star like you saying that to little old me? Of course it’s alright. Feel free to call me anytime. We’re... friends, right?”

Yes, we were friends... friends that had met through Yukari, though.

So Nanami, please call me anytime.

But, please rest assured that I will never, ever forget about Yukari. And so...

I had no need for a world like this.

It seems we’ve gotten a bit ahead of ourselves.

I’ll try to go a bit more in order now so we can all avoid additional confusion.

After a year of knowing Yukari, during the summer break of my second year in junior high, I was involved in an horrific incident that left me gravely wounded, and Yukari had saved (fixed) me.

After that incident, I used that adaptability of mine that Yukari talked about so often to get right back on my feet, and I also sensed I was growing closer to Yukari (and Nanami as well) in the process. But then came the entrance ceremonies right after summer break, on the first day of the new semester.



A transfer student arrived at our class.

She had blonde hair and amber eyes, and a physique that made her look like she had jumped straight out of a work of fiction. Her name was Alice Foyle.

Alice also knew all about Yukari's way of seeing the world.



Oh, actually, I just remembered something else.

Tenjou Nanami had also been the one who had taught me about the strange properties of light.



Alice Foyle¹ was what people would call a “genius.”

That didn’t mean she was just smart... although she certainly was plenty smart. But when she stood up at the teacher’s podium, her blonde hair waving back and forth and extending past her waist, everyone should’ve been confused about why an elementary schooler was in our junior high classroom. Indeed, she was still a child - she was only eleven, but she was a girl of rare talent, who had already earned a college degree - and an Ivy League one at that - even while she was dealing with her *other responsibilities*.

Ultimately, the reason this girl named Alice was extraordinary didn’t boil down to the simple explanation that she was smart.

No, her true genius lied in her way of looking at math.

Apparently, to Alice, mathematical equations looked like drawings.

Whether it was something simple like addition or something difficult like the wave equation, Alice could express equations as drawings, although unfortunately her drawings couldn’t be understood by other people. And then, she could “intuitively” solve those equations (for those of you who are a bit confused about what that might mean, don’t worry. I don’t understand it either. And I doubt the leading physicists in the world could understand it either. Just think of it as Alice being able to put together equations by drawing a picture).

¹ A reference to the novel *The Stars My Destination*, a somewhat obscure sci-fi novel. Alice was clearly somewhat inspired by the main character, Gully Foyle.



It also seemed that she would be able to display her true strength if she just had a “quantum computer,” and she once had said something like “If you actually make a quantum computer, even $P=NP$ wouldn’t be a problem at all!” (of course, I had no idea what that meant, but judging by how proudly she said that I could guess that it was probably something pretty amazing).

Because of her unconventional approaches to problems, people had also placed their hopes on her for discovering a “Theory of Everything.”

The Theory of Everything, or the Grand Unified Theory, was a theory that could coherently account for all the forces that existed in the natural universe.

If we could formulate that theory, then scientists hoped that we could explain everything from the strange behavior of quanta to the mystery of how exactly the universe was created. It was scientists’ dream, their Holy Grail.

And these scientists were saying that Alice might play a role in the discovery of that theory, so you could probably infer from that just how much of a genius she was.

But Alice herself was not a scientist at all, or at least she wasn’t at the present moment.

She also wasn’t studying physics or anything like that.

No, she could just manipulate numerical formulae using that vision of hers.

By thinking through feeling and not through cold calculation, by literally drawing a picture, Alice could arrive at the correct answer. Or she could construct numerical formulae. She lived on a plane that normal humans could never hope to climb to, and it would be no surprise if she caused a paradigm shift in the world of mathematics. Her abilities could change the world, which was precisely what qualified her as a “genius.”

Although, Alice’s condition did closely resemble that of someone else.



Urged by the teacher to stand in front of the class, Alice gave us a dazzling smile and spoke quickly and smoothly.

“Hello, people from Japan. My name is Alice Foyle. We may only be together for a short time, but I look forward to being here with you.

... Especially with Marii Yukari-san.

I was especially looking forward to meeting with *you*.”

Alice Foyle had come to Japan in order to recruit Yukari into the organization she belonged to: Jaunt.

Just like a rose with hard thorns was perfectly fine as long as you just looked at it, Alice Foyle just seemed like a cute little girl if you viewed her from afar.

And maybe it was because she was a foreigner, but I could feel that she would grow into a tremendous beauty in the future.

She was just a child, yet she always looked so crisp and unwilling to show weakness; it was both cute and a bit intimidating at the same time.

However, the only moments Alice didn't seem like that were those when she was with Yukari.

When Alice talked with Yukari, she seemed genuinely her age and wore a carefree expression. As much as I hated to admit it, it was really hard to look away when she was like that.

Alice spent as much time as possible stuck to Yukari by the hip.

When the two of them linked their arms and walked along side by side, it just brought an aura of calm to their surroundings. And when anybody, even those who knew about Alice's true nature like Nanami and me, watched them from behind, staring at Alice's long blonde hair carelessly spilling down her back alongside Yukari's hair, which was undoubtedly lengthy itself, it was impossible to hold back a sigh of awe at these two fluffy little animals.



Yukari herself was fairly fond of skinship, so she didn't seem too displeased with this arrangement, and honestly I felt that the vision of Alice's fluffy blonde hair happily swaying next to Yukari's fluffy black hair was a far more powerful symbol of peace than silly little doves (... granted, I admit that just because Alice and Yukari looked this way from the outside, it was impossible to figure out how they felt about things on the inside).

In front of my classmates, Alice put on her sweet act and just seemed like a precocious child who had worked hard in a foreign, unfamiliar land before joining our class, but in front of Nanami and me (and also there was a boy named Kasoku Tomonori who often came asking for a fight with Nanami, but he's not very important to this story so I'm going to omit any details about him), Alice ended up exposing her true self since we were always with Yukari.

The first minute I found myself alone with Alice, this was the first thing she said to me:

"Let me just make it clear that I have no intention to get cozy with you commoners. Become mixed up with inferior specimens and you may become inferior yourself, after all. The only type I care to associate with are geniuses like myself. Such as Yukari."

"..... Yukari is a genius?"

"Yes. Yukari is a genius. Yukari, you should understand that as well. But these commoners might not be able to understand. They are inferior beings who cannot accept anyone who is different from themselves... so Yukari, please hold your head up with pride. You are the one who is worth something. Those who do not acknowledge your worth should be ashamed that they are even allowed to be alive."

Alice told us that she still found Japanese a bit difficult, so when she talked she often sounded a bit stiff.

But I mean, sure sometimes her sentences came off a bit awkward, but in reality she was most likely deliberately trying to sound stiff so she could be ruder. That was especially obvious whenever there weren't any other classmates around us.



“Commoners... that’s quite a word you picked there. But aren’t you the one who’s going around and trying to burn down bridges? I don’t know if she’s a genius or whatever, but we’ve been her friends for a while and she’s been fine with it. And it’s not just us. That applies to everyone else in the class too.”

“Is that really true? Hatou, is it not possible that this is only what you think? Well, let us leave Hatou aside for a moment. What about you over there, Tenjou?”

“Me? Me... don’t lump me together with Hatou, okay? Hmph, who would be friends with a girl like this? Don’t make me laugh! Marii’s more like an enemy, with those abnormal eyes of hers...”

“Just shut it, Tenjou.”

“..... Uuu, Ten-chan...”

Nanami still just couldn’t be honest with herself. But whatever. I’ll let her be.

Alice called people without any special abilities like us “commoners,” and she didn’t even try to hide her contempt for us.

You could even say she hated us.

In that regard, Alice was a prototypical genius.

She was just a child, and yet she possessed abilities that far surpassed those of any adult. Because of that, she stood out from her surroundings, and was persecuted for her differences... indeed, Alice was the spitting personification of the so-called “genius image.” She never tried to tell anybody about her past, but whether she liked it or not, her attitude made it easy to imagine that something must’ve happened in that past. And in the end, she was still as young as a normal elementary schooler. The more she acted like she hated ordinary people, the more it became painfully obvious that she was still a child.

This might be a bit cynical of me, but that was probably precisely why Jaunt had sent Alice out here.



They had piqued her interest and imagination with the idea of meeting a girl who was also a similar kind of “genius,” and had made Yukari a kind of symbol of how her own future might be like... all so she would be effective at recruiting Yukari into Jaunt.

Most importantly, Alice seemed to genuinely view Jaunt as her guardian.

“Yukari. Jaunt is there to take in and protect ‘special children’ like us, and was created to help us grow. There may not be many members, but they even have constructed a school for us. Do you understand, Yukari? I am going to tell you something very important now.

There are other children who are like us.

Children like you, but who have just not been discovered, who are hidden away from the world.

You and I are quite blessed to be able to meet like this. In most cases, people like us are not even given that opportunity and just fade away. They have no other choice. These children most likely still exist to this day, but they just have yet to be discovered, and even though they possess incredible, potentially world-changing abilities, they are only envied by those around them, targeted, and not allowed to blossom.

Jaunt is an organization that was established to take in and nurture these children.

... But there are some rather sensitive issues at play here, so Jaunt operates in secrecy. But it is quite a proper organization that enjoys support from the government as well.”

By the way, it seemed that “Jaunt” was just an abbreviation, and the organization’s proper name was different.

Originally, “Jaunt” was the name of an ability that appeared in a certain science fiction novel. And apparently, after they had used it as a name for a while out of convenience, the name just stuck.



“Jaunting is what they called a special phenomenon that appeared in a novel written by Alfred Bester. Have you heard of teleportation? Of course, it’s not something that has ever been scientifically realized. It is nothing but a fictional ability, and in this work it was an ability that allowed humans to jump through walls and long distances instantaneously through sheer will. It was an ability that the people of the future had acquired and using as a mode of transportation in place of normal vehicles... but it was also more than that.

It was also depicted as the symbol of a new age, as an ability that shouldered the burden of transforming the entire world.

It was a symbol of dynamic advancement that came from the burning human desire for power. Through jaunting, humans were able to break through a stagnant age and rise to new heights. Jaunting was the innovation that people should chase after, the new way of adapting to the world, the signpost that directed humans to their bright, open future. That was what jaunting meant in this work.

In the beginning, ‘JAUNT’ was just an anagram formed from the initials of the founding members, but now that name is symbolic of the ideal that jaunting represents. We seek out unique abilities in this world that would remain buried otherwise, protecting and nurturing those abilities, all for a better future. That is the meaning of our name, the meaning of Jaunt. In other words, it just is not true that we have forgotten our true name, but that ‘Jaunt’ has already become our true name.”

Alice’s eyes shone as she spoke about the organization she belonged to.

She proudly told us that ‘Foyle’ was a name that had been given to her by the current chairman of Jaunt.

That the minute she joined the organization, she had thrown away her original family name.

On a later day, I found out more about her name.

I found out that the name “Alice” was also not a name she had been given by her birth mother, but something she had decided for herself.



When she was taken in by Jaunt, Alice found herself in a completely new environment, and gave herself a new name. She probably was drawing from Alice in Wonderland, wanting to become like that blonde-haired girl she once saw in a cartoon long ago...

I didn't realize this until later, but Alice's natural hair color wasn't blonde. She actually had black hair but had dyed it.

"... Until Jaunt found me, I did not know what I could accomplish. I just lived life lazily from day to day. But now, I can stand here before you so happily and with such energy because I had found Jaunt."

"This sounds really sketchy. Like you're a used car salesman or someone from a cult or something."

"My, my, are you an expert on such things? If not, then please shut your mouth. Trying to justify things you do not want to understand by just wantonly applying convenient labels to them... this is why I hate being around commoners. Well, I admit I am used to this type of unjustified persecution though..."

"Are you sure it's unjustified? Why don't you use that genius brain of yours and think about it? You... you little know-it-all."

"Just shut it, Tenjou."

"Wah wah, Ten-chan..."



If for a moment, you'd allow me to make excuses, I'd probably say that everything that happened was a case of bad timing.

After all, all this was only slightly after I had gotten involved in the Tokyo Dismemberment Murder case.



I believed that I had already recovered from the shock of being attacked and then having my left hand “healed” with a cell phone. It might’ve just been that the reality of it hadn’t sunk in yet, but at the very least I was fairly calm and I wasn’t afraid of Yukari after she had repelled my attacker, so it wasn’t like I was screaming and trying actively to get away from her (apparently for a period of time Nanami was like that though).

However, now that I was calm about everything, there were definitely some things that *did* sink in.

Yukari’s ability wasn’t just that she saw everyone else as a robot.

After all, she had managed to completely restore my severed arm to its original state.

After she had fixed that severed arm, within a day I could use my left hand again without feeling that anything was off. Was this possible by any standard of modern medical science? Could it be... no, it was pretty obvious actually, but Yukari’s ability was quite precious, was it not?

Just by looking at a photo, Yukari correctly identified the culprit in the Tokyo Dismemberment Murder.

Also... I remember Yukari had called some strange things her “friends” back in the warehouse...

You couldn’t be considered a genius just because you were smart.

No, you had to have *something* that could change the world if you wanted to qualify as a genius.

Whether it was science, or literature or art or music, or even political science, it was a genius who had appeared and dreamed up these genres.

To think that one person couldn’t change the world was to think like a commoner.

A genius would surely change the world. He or she would become an impetus that would move the Earth itself.

Of course, there was a limit to how much power one person could



have, but geniuses also had the ability to turn their many followers into patrons.

Just like Alice had said, Yukari was definitely a genius.

She said she could see people as robots. But those were just her words, and there was no way to verify that.

Because of that, she could get away with just being thought of as a girl who was a bit strange, and otherwise could live normally.

However, what happened to me and Nanami was very real, and this outcome was completely reproducible - we could actually testify to what she had done, and not just take her at her word.

If people found out about what Yukari had done to Nanami and me, if people found out about her purple eyes, then it would definitely incite panic throughout the world.

And if her abilities could actually be analyzed and explained, then that would usher in nothing less than a scientific revolution.

Yes, my friend Marii Yukari certainly possessed the ability to change the world.

And, even though I was Yukari's friend, I couldn't really do anything for her with regards to her abilities.

I couldn't help guide her down the right path, nor could I hide and protect her.

On the other hand, Yukari also seemed to feel indebted to me whenever people who were targeting her ended up attacking me, or whenever I got wrapped up in something because of her.

This really is just an excuse, but... the timing was just not good.

In the beginning, Alice just tried to go after Yukari.

Alice would tell Yukari that she shouldn't stay around commoners. That we would end up betraying her and causing her pain. Even if we seemed to be friendly on the outside, we really feared her on the inside and were making fun of her and laughing at her from the shadows.



That's what commoners did, according to Alice.

However, I really had come to terms with Yukari's abilities and the whole Tokyo Dismemberment Murder incident, and once she realized that Yukari's trust in me was unwavering, Alice changed tactics.

She started to come after me as well.

"Hatou. If you really have accepted Yukari for what she is, then you should be able to understand exactly how wonderful Yukari's abilities are. Exactly how precious they are. But to let those abilities just fester and rot in the midst of all these commoners... do you not feel you are betraying your duties to humankind?"

"... That's... but, that doesn't have anything to do with Yukari. Yukari has her own life she wants to live."

"Yes, I quite understand that. However, that is something a spoiled child might say. Everyone has a duty he or she must fulfill to society... and no matter how you and Yukari feel, do you really think you can continue to hide her away forever? Certainly, it might not be easy to notice Yukari's powers, but we managed to find her, did we not?"

I had heard that Yukari's father was a pretty big deal in the National Police Agency (not to be confused with the Metropolitan Police Department).

Yukari never had gone into details, but it seemed that after he had found out about Yukari's way of seeing things, Yukari's father had retired from his job and moved here. It was probably for Yukari's sake... is what Yukari told me. And she seemed to be fairly preoccupied with the thought that her father might've quit his job because of her.

That explained why, for a period of time, Yukari would help her father's juniors with their work as long as they kept it off the record.

However, by trying so hard to keep these things private, they ended up drawing attention to themselves, and suddenly there were people showing up who had looked into Yukari and knew that she claimed that she saw others as robots.

They had also looked into the incident with Nanami.



And this time, what had happened to me was the straw that broke the camel's back.

To be quite honest, there were quite a few people who had heard Yukari say that she saw other people as robots.

After all, because of that line, Yukari had been bullied as a child, and had even lost friends.

But, in most cases, people would just go "So what?" and that would be the end of that.

Whether Yukari was telling the truth or not, it's not like anybody could verify what she said, and it didn't really affect anybody in real life, people thought.

However, what had happened to me was a different story.

What had happened to the murderer, who suddenly had come to peace with everything, was a different story.

Leaving Nanami's incident aside for now, certainly everything that had happened to me had come to a rather bizarre conclusion. The murderer had taken me hostage and barricaded herself in that warehouse, and later a large number of bloodstains and blood-soaked instruments were found there (and it was determined that the blood was definitely mine). But despite all that, I didn't have a single visible wound on my body, nor a sign that I had been hurt. The same applied to Yukari, who had faced off against the murderer by herself. Meanwhile, the murderer seemed to have a sudden dramatic change of heart and turned herself in.

And after all was said and done, not a single page of a police report was filed, and not a single record of the incident was left behind, almost as if some higher power was flexing its muscles from the shadows.

It would honestly be hard to not find any irregularities in this affair, even if you tried hard not to.



“Unfortunately, Yukari has yet to tell me what exactly happened during that incident, and all we have right now is circumstantial evidence. However, anyone with a working brain, even a commoner, would be able to put two and two together well enough. That is why I am here. So, I ask you once again.

Do you really think you can keep Yukari hidden forever?

When an organization full of commoners appears and wants to use Yukari’s abilities only for evil purposes, are you confident you can protect her?

Because we can protect her.

Jaunt was created precisely to protect people with abilities like mine or Yukari’s from those kinds of commoners. We have the power to accomplish that goal.

Let me repeat the major point, Hatou. Can you protect Yukari? Does a mere commoner like you really have the strength to do that?”

I knew the answer to that question all too well, but it was an answer I could not give her.

The timing really was just too bad.

Yukari’s parents had quit their jobs and moved here for her sake, and because of what had happened to me they were quite shocked. They felt that something similar might happen in the future, and although we were lucky this time, there might be casualties eventually. But even if they thought that, they didn’t make any rash decisions and wanted to respect Yukari’s feelings on the matter.

I didn’t really check this, but Alice had probably told Yukari something similar to what she had told me.

That Yukari couldn’t just try and stay hidden from the world forever.

That at some point, someone would set eyes on Yukari's abilities. Maybe it would just be out of curiosity, which would be fine, but maybe that person was trying to use Yukari's abilities for something. At that point, maybe they would take hostages, and maybe like that incident with me, they would have come up with some peculiar theory to justify attacking us (it wouldn't be strange for commoners to be prejudiced against Yukari after all). And when that time came, could she really say with conviction that like the last time, she could protect her friends again?

Even if Alice had persuaded Yukari in that fashion, I really couldn't criticize her for using a cowardly line of attack or anything.

Because as Yukari's friend, ignoring the possibility that such things could happen was just running away from the issue. And if we waited until after *something* fatal happened, then it would be too late.

But, more than anything... even if she was trying to be heavy-handed... Alice really seemed desperate about it.

Whenever I started thinking about Alice Foyle, I felt myself losing my cool.

It was probably because somewhere in the bottom of my heart, I still blamed Alice for Yukari's death. I know I was just grasping for straws and acting out of anger, but for some reason I just couldn't get rid of that thought, and I really felt like I hated Alice.

But on the other hand, I felt affection for her as well.

It was a bright, verdant affection, which seemed to completely be at odds with my hatred.

It was also an unintended affection, developed over my *many, many repeated meetings* with Alice.

These conflicting emotions existed simultaneously inside of me. My feelings were a contradiction onto themselves.

Alice herself was also undoubtedly a good girl.



She might call us commoners and show contempt for us, but that's just because she didn't want to be hurt. Yes... I knew. After meeting her so many times, hating her, loving her, protecting her, killing her, I came to know about a lot of things that I didn't even want to know. That's why I knew all this. That's why I knew that Alice wasn't her real name. That's why I knew she dyed her hair. That's why I knew she had been bullied before... that people had called her "the Demon Child."

Alice didn't have a father.

Her young mother got addicted to drugs, and then became involved with a cult religion.

When Alice was born, her mother took it as God's blessing, but when Alice began to demonstrate that she had strange abilities and began deviating from the normal path, her mother took that to be a symbol of her own sins. She thought that her own rampant drug addiction had influenced her unborn child. She decided that Alice was a demon child born out of her drug habit, and that *correcting* the situation would be her atonement for her sins.

Yes, I knew.

I knew that her mother's convictions were just a warped form of attention seeking.

That to Alice's mother, Alice was nothing more than a symbol for her need for atonement, that Alice just being Alice was in and of itself a sin, that until Jaunt found and rescued Alice, Alice had been living while rejecting any value that she herself might have had. No, not living... she was being allowed to live. Just so her mother could feel like she was abiding by god's teachings.

Alice had once asked me something.

"Hatou, exactly what do you think about Yukari's way of seeing things? Do you not find it creepy?"

"Not really. Yukari's eyes are just wonderful. Or I guess... I'd say they're really full of life?"

“Yes, Hatou. Exactly. That is quite a precise assessment for a commoner. I suppose you are only a semi-commoner. Indeed, Yukari’s purple eyes are wonderful things that can show us the full bounty of the world. They are nothing short of gifts from the heavens that we should be thankful for.

And yet, why do you act as if they are bad things and continue to try and hide them away?

Why do you not allow Yukari to be herself?”

Why?

It was a life or death struggle for Alice trying to convince Yukari. Come join Jaunt, Yukari. At Jaunt, you won’t have to hide your eyes. At Jaunt, you can just be yourself. At Jaunt, people would let you do that. There isn’t a single person at Jaunt who would persecute us geniuses. Just because you have special abilities doesn’t mean anybody at Jaunt would reject you.

“Yukari should be at Jaunt. She should be with people with the same abilities, with her comrades.”

Yes.

It wasn’t Yukari who was searching for friends... it was Alice.

It was Alice who needed friends. Friends who weren’t commoners, who had the same types of abilities as she did. If they also had these types of abilities, then they wouldn’t reject her, wouldn’t betray her, could be her true friends... That’s why she was so desperate.

She was searching for companionship.

And she felt that Yukari was like her, which was why she was desperately trying to recruit her.

So, could I really have criticized someone like that for being cowardly?



I... we... we didn’t have it in our power to protect Yukari.



We couldn't even protect her from this everyday world of ours, let alone vicious criminals and mysterious organizations.

But, if Yukari went with Alice and joined Jaunt, then they could protect her.

She wouldn't have to hide away there. She wouldn't have to reject her own eyes.

And that wasn't all. If this organization really was gathering up promising "genius" candidates with bright futures, then Yukari might even learn to develop her own abilities. They might be able to unravel the mystery of why only Yukari saw other people as robots. And when that happened, maybe they would be able to allow others to share Yukari's vision of the world. If that occurred, then Yukari would truly stop being alone.

What... what should I do here?

If I really wanted to be a friend to Yukari, should I stop thinking in terms of what I was feeling right now and start thinking in terms of what was best for Yukari?

And if so, what should I do here? As a commoner, was there anything I could do for Yukari?

If I was really Yukari's friend, and not just acting like it, then I should choose...



In the end, a single phone call made up my mind.

My mind was actually pretty much already made up... but I just couldn't take that final step. And as I lay in bed that night feeling troubled and not able to sleep, that phone call came.

Came right to my *left hand*, to that phone which only knew a very limited set of phone numbers.

And nothing in the world could've prepared me for the person on the other end of the call.



Yukari sees other people as robots, and one time I had asked her what kind of robot she saw me as.

And I was told that I looked like an “all-purpose” robot.

When she put it like that, it seemed like I was just a dime-a-dozen worthless thing, but Yukari reassured me that it was really something amazing, and from her point of view I supported a lot of peripheral devices. According to her, as long as I had the proper equipment attached, I could adapt to any situation.

Almost as if trying to prove her right, the cell phone parts she had used in order to repair my left hand still seemed to function as a cell phone even after becoming my left hand.

My left hand still looked completely like a normal left hand to me, and yet I could still use it to make and receive calls.

On the other hand, even though Yukari had used a jungle gym to repair Nanami’s body, it’s not like she could suddenly turn her body into steel or was any sturdier than a normal person, so this phenomenon seemed limited to me.

By the way, it’s not like I could just use this phone whenever I wanted; there were definitely a few limitations here.

First, it had to be nighttime.



Whether there was light or not, when the sun was out I couldn't use my left hand as a phone. It didn't have to be pitch black, but I had to be in a somewhat dark room, and also my left hand never worked as a phone if I wasn't alone (quite a while later, I guess the technology got better or something, but this particular restriction went away).

And, most importantly, the phone took a dreadful amount of stamina to use.

One time, I used the phone to talk with Yukari and felt so hungry afterwards that I collapsed.

I had been watching a Western movie on the TV while talking, but of course just as a cell phone normally needed electricity, my left hand was part of my body, and so instead of electricity it consumed my stamina.

In the first place, this was my left hand and not a cell phone, so the more I used it as a cell phone the more terrible the stamina drain became (and this wasn't an additive effect we're talking about; it was more like a multiplicative one). So before I knew it, I was absurdly hungry. My body started shaking even though it wasn't cold, I grew dizzy, and I felt a cold sweat flow from my forehead like a waterfall. When I weighed myself later I saw that I had dropped a kilogram in two hours. At that point, things were obviously not a laughing matter anymore, and I ended up calling Yukari over to my place again to help me out of this mess. Now, I always kept honey and some sweets in my room for when I needed to make a call.

Anyways, because of that, the people from the police ended up buying me another cell phone for daily use, and I never told anyone - not Nanami and certainly not my parents - about my left hand. Instead, that left hand cell phone became something I used exclusively to call Yukari.

So, when I got another call on that phone, I was convinced it was Yukari and picked up the call without any doubt in my mind.

This might sound rather strange, but I picked up that call before the phone even had a chance to ring.

I had no idea how, but I just knew. I knew that I was getting a call.



It wasn't even like one of those desk phones that makes a noise when it senses another incoming call. No, I felt that I was going to get a call, and before the ring I picked up the phone. And then...

Before the person on the other line could talk, I knew who it was.

Indeed, before I heard anything from the other end, I realized that it wasn't Yukari calling me... and I could not even begin to believe who was on the other end. My body froze over. But whether or not the person on the other end knew how I was feeling, *she* spoke six words, almost sounding like she was mumbling to herself through tears.

"... Please... Yukari will die like this..."

By the time I had regained my senses, the call had already been cut.

But even so, I continued staring at my left hand for quite a while.

I just couldn't take my eyes off that hand, even after the display that was showing through my skin had faded.

Calm down. That wasn't anything. It was all a hallucination... I guess in this case, an audio hallucination?

Yes, I was just hearing things. Obviously. If I thought about it for more than a second, I would realize that I never had heard a ringtone. So nobody had really called me - it was all just my imagination. Yes, I was just so worried about Yukari and so tired that I had just dozed off for a second...

... Yukari will die like this?

I inhaled through my nose and exhaled through my mouth, trying to calm my racing heart. I repeated those words to myself. Yes... things couldn't go on like this. I understood that all too well. And in the bottom of my heart, I knew what the best thing for Yukari was right now. But I just didn't have the courage to decide, and I had grown so obsessed with this decision that my hesitation had turned into a hallucination. That was all this was...

Yes. Otherwise, there was just no way.



*No way that it had been **me** on the other line.*

*No way that it had been **me** speaking into the receiver on the other side.*

I had a feeling that the voice on the other end was a bit different from my own voice, which I had become so familiar with.

And yet, I still somehow felt that the voice on the other end had been mine.

I still felt that the person with that voice had been me.

But of course, that was impossible.

So, this must've been a hallucination born from stress. It couldn't have been real...

Once I convinced myself of that, I managed to regain a semblance of calm in my heart. And then, finally...

I made up my mind.

The next day, I went up and told Yukari.

Told Yukari in a completely roundabout, timid, uncharacteristic way, that it might not be the end of the world to maybe consider what Alice was proposing as just one other option.

Told her that even if she picked that option, that even if we separated from each other, we would still always be friends.

"We can still see each other whenever we want... or maybe not. But you know, you can probably still come back during holidays and stuff, right? And I can also go over there to see you, maybe? But anyways, Yukari, even if you choose to go over there, we'll always be friends. Right?"

"..... Yeah. That's true."

"And I'll... I'll always be waiting for you. Well... uhh... that's assuming you choose to go with Alice, I mean."

What a stupid hypocrite I was.



I knew that for kids, most friendships ended when one person transferred out of the school.

But I completely bought into the belief that we weren't like that. That we would always be friends.

... In the end, the thing that made up Yukari's mind was my words... my approval.

Yes, after I had said all that to her, it's not like Yukari could've chosen anything different.

I... this person who was supposed to be Yukari's friend... I had driven her into a corner.



Alice and Yukari both waited until the third school term had ended before transferring away.

I learned that the school at Jaunt had a dormitory system, and that Yukari had to go alone without her family (of course, before she moved there, she had gone over with her family to the Jaunt campus during winter break so they could check it out and fill out all the necessary paperwork).



It took less than half a year before I received a notice that Yukari had died.



One line of attack that Alice had used to try and woo Yukari was to talk about the school at Jaunt.

Alice spoke with quite a bit of pride.

“If you come to Jaunt, Yukari, then you will receive the finest of educations. Not the standard education that the commoners receive. You will be able to study the things that you need. Did you know...? Thomas Edison, whom they called the King of Invention, was actually a problem child in school. Einstein, who formulated the Theory of Relativity, was also a school dropout. Of course, I do not even need to tell you that these two were geniuses. In other words, it was the school that was at fault. The school could not give them the education that would satisfy them. However, at the Jaunt school, you will not have to worry about such things.

Yukari, you will be able to learn about yourself.

You will be able to learn about yourself together with other geniuses who are just like us, and in the best possible environment.

... It may even be possible that one day we will be able to understand the mysteries of your eyes.”

“Wah... do you really think so?”



“Of course. The school was erected for the sake of us geniuses, and the world is a wide, open place... have you not heard the Japanese proverb? A frog in a well does not know of the ocean and believes that its well is the entire world. Or no... was that a Chinese proverb? No, actually, I have a better example that fits Yukari perfectly. Have you heard of the Black and White Room thought experiment proposed by Frank Jackson?”

What Alice described was the following hypothetical situation:

Mary is a genius philosopher, and from the moment she was born she lived in a black and white room.

The room has no windows, the television is also black and white, and she has never seen anything that would count as “color.”

But she was a genius, and with that superb intellect of hers she already has learned all the scientific information there was to know about color. Her physical knowledge of how color works was perfect. However, she was stuck in this black and white room, so she had never seen color for herself.

Now, when Mary was released from that room and goes into the world overflowing with color outside, was there something that she could learn about color that she had not already studied?

“The main point of this thought experiment is to consider where the new ‘something’ that Mary learns comes from, but for the purposes of this discussion you need not concern yourself with that. The important point I would like to make now is that no matter what you may ‘know,’ you will not understand it until you leave your room and see it for yourself.

Yukari... the place you are in now is none other than a black and white room.

There is a world filled with color outside, and I am here to give you the opportunity to see that world. Do you understand, Yukari? Once Mary exits that black and white room, she realizes something. She realizes that there was a wide, open, beautiful world outside that she could never have understood from within her black-and-white prison cell.”



Alice had approached this subject by starting from the perspective of the frog in the well, but I was interested in all this from a different angle.

I really wish Nanami had been here listening to this (but unfortunately, every single time Nanami was in the same room with Alice she would get goaded by Alice and end up shouting out something like “No, I’m seriously not Marii’s friend!” so nowadays she generally tried to avoid Alice).

Nanami had told me once that our bodies... no, the entire world was made up of these probabilistic entities called quanta, and that it’s possible our existences were only fully established when we were “observed.” And that it’s possible the basis for this establishing came from the qualia that emerged in our heads. That perhaps qualia was precisely the reason why Nanami’s body was established as human flesh and not steel. That perhaps Yukari experienced different qualia when she looked at us, and that’s precisely why she not only saw our bodies as robots, but to her our bodies were established as robot parts that she could repair.

However, exactly where did that qualia come from?

We can look at the same thing but feel different qualia. That didn’t just apply to us and Yukari, but also to me and Nanami. But why was that?

After Yukari transferred away, I began to vaguely think about such things.

When I turned my thoughts to really specialized, uncommon topics like qualia, it just made me feel like I was still connected to Yukari in some way, and honestly it also made me more interested in what had happened to me.

So, I started studying a number of things.

Nanami and I had begun to grow apart around that time, so I had to study alone. However, I did have a reassuring ally in my endeavors.

When it became night, I sat down with some sugary juice and sweets, and dialed out with my left hand.



"Hello? Umm... I guess I should ask, but this is the first time we've met... right?"

"Not really? Well, I guess it is, but at the same time it's not... uwah... umm... hello, *me*?"

Dialed out to the *me* in another world.



I thought of the idea to call myself with my left hand because that incident the other night left me had infinitely curious about this mysterious phone.

No matter how I tried to think about it, I couldn't help but think that the person on the other line that night had been myself.

However, at the same time, it was an impossible notion that I had called myself on the phone.

So, that must've just been an illusion... I must've been just hearing things. But no matter how many times I told that to myself, I couldn't get that voice out of my head.

Suddenly, I looked down at my left hand. In my head, that warning about Yukari's life being in danger repeated itself, feeling more real than ever.

After Yukari had transferred away, I still managed to keep in touch with her via phone for a while.

But there were some issues with time zones, and before long we had switched to exchanging handwritten letters (my left hand should've had a text function installed, but I had no idea how to use it). In the first letter I got from her, she told me in a roundabout way that she probably wouldn't be able to stay in contact too frequently anymore. She said that she had a lot to do and it would be a while before things calmed down.

... Well, it was good that she was busy. I felt a bit lonely, but this was for Yukari's sake...



One night, I was turning the situation over and over in my head while looking at my left hand.

And then it hit me.

What would happen if I tried placing a phone call to myself?

Of course, I was expecting the call to go through. Yes, that call would obviously go through *to myself*.

It wasn't like I was seriously expecting to be able to talk to *that girl from that night* again.

No, I just suddenly wanted to hear my own voice over the phone again.

If I just heard my own voice again, then I could finally convince myself that the voice on the phone that night was not my own. And if I could convince myself of that, then I'd feel a lot better. Then I could accept that the phone call that night had just been a misunderstanding, or that some wires had been crossed somewhere. So I wanted to make sure... and once that idea got into my head, I just couldn't sit still anymore and immediately tried it out. If I had just calmed down and thought about it for a second, I might've thought of the potential problem that calling myself would just give me a busy signal, but at that point I really wasn't thinking about that.

So, I dialed my own number.

"Hello, Yuka-... ehh? Who are you? ... *Is this me?*"

"... Uwah, this is just... wha-? *Is this me?*"

And quite literally, I found myself talking to myself.



This might sound hard to believe, but that's exactly what happened, so there wasn't much I could do about it. And just like the whole dismemberment business from before, I found that soon enough I had taken this in stride.



Almost every night after that, I would make a phone call to myself, and sometimes would get a phone call from myself, but I never managed to call the me from that first night. Actually, I never managed to call the *same me* - as strange an expression as that is - on any night. Every call I made was to a me I was meeting for the first time, but we also shared the same knowledge and experiences. Sure, there were some small differences - for example, the me I called today had talked with a lot more me's than I had - but the minute the call connected, any information about the me on the other line just seemed to melt into my head.

Just like that first night, just like how I knew I was talking to me before any words were even exchanged, the minute the call connected I knew what the other me was thinking and what she wanted to say, almost like her thoughts and feelings were welling up in my own mind. Sometimes, I couldn't even tell whether it was me or the other me who was talking on the phone.

However, the words kept on flowing from our mouths, and we always talked to each other.

When we talked with each other like this, it was tacitly understood that we already understood each other - if not, things might quickly have devolved into chaos.

In the beginning, we were all a bit bewildered by this whole situation, but after we had come to accept it, I could talk to these other me's quite naturally.

And, once I came to accept this situation, I found myself only talking to other me's who had also accepted the situation... it seemed that the me from *here* formed the fundamental standard for all these me's.

So, all these me's came to accept the situation, and we talked a lot with each other.

Especially about this whole situation.

Exactly what was this "me" that I was talking to on the phone right now?

And how did everything get like this?



"It's probably that, isn't it? You know... that 'Multiple Worlds Theory' that Tenjou was talking about."

"Or maybe you're just me from a different spot on the probability curve. So do we accept the Copenhagen Interpretation or the Many Worlds Interpretation? Or maybe even the Pilot Wave Interpretation?"

This was the first time I've heard of this "Pilot Wave Interpretation," but the minute this other me said those words, I immediately understood it. Well... I understood it as much as this other me did, at least.

This other, more studious me continued.

"Well, those pretty smart scholars still haven't really come to any real conclusions about any of this, so it's not like we have any chance. More importantly, what we should be thinking about is why something like this is happening to us."

"Well, on that topic, the me I was talking to yesterday had the following hypothesis: maybe it's just all this left hand's fault? Umm... well, it's not like any of us are real scientists, so take all this with a grain of salt, okay? It's probably easiest if I explain this using the Copenhagen Interpretation, so... by that theory, by nature quanta are not determined until they are observed, right?"

"Yeah."

"Also, Tenjou's body was repaired with steel. But Tenjou can't really observe that her body is anything other than her own body, so to put it plainly, all the repaired parts of her body seem like normal flesh. Everything okay so far?"

"Please continue."

"However, in my case... well, Yukari said it, right? I'm an all-purpose robot, and I can handle a lot of peripheral devices to adapt to any situation. So unlike Tenjou, I can accept this left hand for what it is and actually adapt to it. It might be a left hand, but it's also a cell phone, because I've accepted it for *what it is*."

"Hmmm, I see..."



“So, if I want to put this in the language of quantum mechanics, then I might say that *my left hand is right now a superposition of a normal hand and a cell phone*. And I’ve completely adapted to that, so I can use it as a normal hand and also as a cell phone. Could it be something like that?”

Right now, if we were to go by the Copenhagen Interpretation, then my left hand was in a superposition of infinite possibilities. If we were to go by the Many Worlds Interpretation, my hand existed in infinite parallel worlds which were still interacting with each other, and thus the state of my hand was still not fully determined with certainty.

Or maybe it was more precise to say the state my hand *was* determined, but that state was just the state of being in all those parallel worlds.

Whatever the correct interpretation, the end result was the same.

Namely, beyond that left hand lay my body, and then my head, and ultimately the existence that was me.

In other words, through my left hand, I could connect to all the infinite me’s that existed in these parallel worlds.

“So, it’s all because of this left hand that we can talk to each other like this. So maybe without this left hand, our wave functions would have collapsed already, or the worlds we’re in would have already stopped interacting with each other.”

“... I see, I think? So... right now I can actually use my left hand as a cell phone, and that means I recognize it as not only my left hand but also as a cell phone, and in the other worlds, or in the other possibilities, there are also me’s who have accepted it like that, and so we can talk to each other like this... am I in the ballpark?”

I groaned.



"I kind of understand this and don't understand this at the same time... wow, I'm getting a bit dizzy here. Seriously, what is going on with all this? ... If I really can use my left hand to talk with all the possible me's, then the minute I cut this phone call and this 'cell phone' stops being a cell phone and gets fixed as only a 'left hand,' then do you just disappear? And once this 'left hand' becomes a 'cell phone' again--"

"Hey, wait just a second. Why am I the one who disappears? Maybe you're the one who disappears?"

"No no no no, wait. I mean, I'm the one who made this-... huh?"

I suddenly realized that I had no idea anymore who had made this call.

Well, it's not like knowing that would have solved anything though...

"... Maybe we should just stick with the Many Worlds Interpretation... well, it's not like I understand that interpretation all too much better..."

"... Yeah, I know, right?"

I wished the other me a good night and ended the call.

And then suddenly I started disappearing... just kidding. No, instead I opened up a bag of sweets to replenish my stamina, and I thought about the me I had just talked to right now.

Had she disappeared?

Or, maybe she was in a different, parallel world, eating candy just like me?

No, even parallel worlds could be created and destroyed... well, I guess either way the result was the same, and I would never meet that same *her* again...

"Am I... really the *same me* as the me before the phone call...?"



Sure, I now understood the Pilot Wave Interpretation, something I didn't understand before that phone call, but that didn't really prove anything. And either way, it didn't really change anything.

I stopped worrying about it.



"Did you know? According to the research of Roger Penrose and Stuart Hameroff, our very minds might be a certain type of quantum computer. They say that there are these 'microtubules' in our neurons that, through some quantum mechanism, give rise to our consciousness."

"Quantum mechanisms give rise to our consciousness? But everything in this world is made from quanta, right? By that logic, could it be possible that not only humans, but also robots could also have consciousness? I'm pretty sure Yukari would be happy if we asked her that question. By the way... I've been meaning to ask this for a while, but what's a quantum computer?"

"..... You know perfectly well I don't know, so why even bother asking?"

I might have been bewildered by all this in the beginning, but I have to be a bit proud of myself here. I have to say, I sure adapted well to the situation, and once that happened I realized that being able to talk to myself really wasn't bad at all.

In fact, it gave me a certain type of hope.

I mean... sure, the reason I could do this was mainly because Yukari had fixed me, but in a certain sense couldn't you say that this was my own "ability"?

At the very least, if I could talk to the me's in the other parallel worlds (or the other possibilities), then that means I'm not a commoner, right?

After that thought hit me, I began to study as hard as possible.



I wanted to somehow make this “ability” of mine useful. If they found out that this “ability” that Yukari had dubbed “adapting to anything and everything” could actually be useful, maybe they’d recruit me into Jaunt as well. Okay, I’ll be honest... I was just a third year junior high student back then, and I really didn’t realize how special I was. As long as I had the ability to do what I could do, even if I didn’t study so hard Jaunt would probably have welcomed me with open arms. But I didn’t realize that, and I began to read books with all my might. I justified it by saying I was studying for exams, and even completely stopped practicing the naginata. At home, I would always be at my desk, and during the day I would often be at the library. I would grab any book I could get my hands onto, expanding my vocabulary to include such words as ‘the hard problem of consciousness’ or ‘the two-slit experiment’ or ‘quantum decoherence’ (did I understand what they meant? Eh, just don’t ask). I tried studying the wave equation, chuckling at the irony that Hatou Manabu was studying waves (for the Japanese challenged people out there, studying waves would be “hadou wo manabu”), but then I realized that I had no talent for mathematics. Equations became something like my mortal enemy. But alas, reality was cruel, and there were many, many things in this world that a third year in junior high just couldn’t do... but that didn’t stop me from trying hard, joining forces with all the other me’s, and using almost all of my time to acquire knowledge that seemed like it might be useful (although, I admit that I was still me, and there wasn’t a brave me in any of the parallel worlds who ventured to take another crack at the wave equation).

I thought that if I tried hard, then I could be with Yukari again.

I didn’t pay any mind to the fact that the letters from Yukari had stopped coming.

“Hm, maybe she’ll come back for summer break?”

“Yeah, she will. Maybe... maybe Alice will come back with her. Until then, I really want to work at it so something becomes of *this*.”

“But honestly, this stuff won’t really help for normal stuff, will it? I mean, leaving myself aside, it’s not like it affects other people at all, and we can’t even use this cell phone in front of other people in the first place... ugh, this is really annoying. I wonder if this is how Yukari felt back then...?”



In that case, I would actually be happy... to think I might be able to understand how Yukari felt...

When she comes back, I'll definitely ask her. Ask her about everything.

As I thought about all that, I continued talking to another me on the phone while writing down various words that might help me explain what had happened to me.

All the while, I looked forward to Yukari's return and the look on her face when I told her about my "ability."

But summer vacation came and passed, and Yukari did not return.

Not even her corpse.



I should warn you.

At this point, the story is about to take a sudden, drastic turn.



In mid-August, around when Obon had just passed, I received a phone call from Yukari's mother and learned of her death.

She told me that Yukari had gotten involved with some kind of experiment.

That the accident had been so bad that the entire facility had suffered damage, and that only a bit of her remains had been recovered.

That the state of affairs had been so awful that they had taken it upon themselves (even if they were overstepping their bounds) to cremate Yukari's remains. This was all told to Yukari's parents by a (Japanese) representative of Jaunt. He had brought a small urn with him.

I didn't really know all the details, but apparently the representative told Yukari's parents that the specifics of the accident she had gotten caught up in were classified, and so he couldn't divulge anything more.

Yukari's parents were shocked, and began to shed tears.

Yukari's mother and siblings completely lost their cool and shouted angry abuse at the Jaunt representative. "Yukari hadn't even been gone for half a year, and this?!" they lamented.

Yukari's father just stood there quietly and asked questions.



He wanted more details of what had happened. He wanted to properly grasp the situation.

Experiment? What kind of experiment were they conducting? There were children there, so what happened to the safety response teams? State secret? Duty of confidentiality? What happened to our rights? What happened to the faith we placed in you when we entrusted our child to you? If you don't answer my questions, I'll show you something...

For those of us who knew about Yukari's eyes, we didn't have to be grieving parents to think that the circumstances surrounding her death were suspicious.

For me, I just stood there in a daze and my mind went completely blank.

Maybe they expected this, or maybe they knew that despite his retirement Yukari's father still had quite a lot of pull within the National Police Agency, but Jaunt ended up giving Yukari's father permission to go inspect their organization. They didn't have to, but they just wanted to show their sincerity. And they prefaced this by saying that if he saw what they were talking about, he would also probably realize the gravity of the situation.

Yukari's funeral was a subdued affair and happened in her home.

Everyone else who came was an adult; there were policemen and important politicians, but I was the only child in attendance.

Nanami hadn't even been invited, let alone any of Yukari's former classmates.

Now that I thought about it, it was possible that Yukari's parents knew about the trauma that Nanami had suffered in the past. And they might've also known that after Yukari transferred away, Nanami was finally managing to get back on her feet. So they didn't inform Nanami of the funeral.

I didn't consider that cold.

In fact, I honestly couldn't care less about Nanami at the moment.



I didn't even have the time to realize that Nanami wasn't present at the funeral, let alone worry about it. No, I just stood there in a daze, in the midst of all these adults who were standing stock still in their black clothes. It was almost like I was lost in a desolate forest in winter.

I remember standing in front of the coffin, which had been placed upon a plain, unadorned stand, and thinking about how Yukari's remains couldn't possibly be in there.

Everything in my field of view washed over me in monotone blacks and whites as I just idly gazed straight ahead.

And then... I saw a flash of gold in a corner of my eye.

Anything gold would immediately stand out in the middle of this world of black and white, and so I couldn't help but turn towards the flash, and it dawned on me rather slowly that the gold I saw had been the color of someone's hair.

Ahh, that head of hair seemed familiar for some reason...

She might've seemed completely different in that set of black clothes and with her blonde hair tied up like that, but there was no mistaking it. That was the girl who had taken Yukari away...

"..... Alice?"

My voice was as hushed as a whisper, but the blonde-haired girl whipped her head around to look at me with the force of a slingshot.

Her eyes met mine.

Her eyelids were swollen, and as I looked into those muddled, glassy eyes of her I could find none of the grand luster that I had seen there before.

Before I could say a single word, Alice turned her face around and also began to quickly walk away.

Her back was to me now, almost as if she was trying to escape from my gaze, and she quickly disappeared past the other end of the hallway.

Before I realized it, I had broken out into a run after her.



I didn't care that people were looking at me now. I ran through the hallway and exited out the front door.

Even though we were having a funeral inside, the sun was shining in the sky outside. I felt myself grow dizzy for a moment.

But despite my efforts, I didn't see Alice anywhere near me. I looked all around me, before spying a slender black car parked on a road quite far from Yukari's home.

Alice was just opening the car door.

"Alice!"

I saw her body jolt, so there was no way she didn't hear me.

But she didn't even try to look in my direction and stepped into the car, closing the door behind her.

The windows on the car were tinted, so I couldn't see Alice's face.

I ran towards the car.

The car's engine roared to life and the car began driving away, but I didn't stop.

I glared at the sight of the car retreating farther and farther away from me, but I kept running.

I felt a sharp pain in my foot as I stepped on the small pebbles in the road, and I realized I wasn't wearing any shoes... I had rushed out of the funeral in my socks. But still, I didn't stop.

The black car soon completely disappeared from my view, and I suddenly felt my legs, and then my entire body begin to shake.

I collapsed down onto the ground.

And finally, I realized that I was crying.

The tears... they just wouldn't stop.



Alice had run away. Run away from me.

That Alice, the one who had called me a commoner and who would take on the entire world before backing down.

That Alice, the one who had told me I couldn't protect Yukari, who had criticized me for my weakness.

That Alice, who had boasted that she and her organization could protect Yukari.

She had run away from me.

I gripped my fists tight in fury.

But the reason my gripped fists were trembling was not due to rage or anger, but due to suspicion.

Why did she run? Why would someone with as much pride as Alice run?

Why? Why would she scurry away like a little rat from me?

Had she done something worth hiding? Did she fail at protecting Yukari? She was going on and on with that big mouth of hers about how great she was, but did she let Yukari die? She was supposed to be Yukari's friend, wasn't she? So as Yukari's friend, had she done something she wasn't proud of?

If she hadn't, why would she have run out of Yukari's funeral?

If I had just been thinking a bit more calmly, I might've realized that no matter how much she acted like an adult, no matter how much of a genius she was, Alice was still a child.

And in that case, it wouldn't be strange for her to refuse to face me and to run away.

But I needed some basis for fighting against a reality that I did not want to believe.

If I couldn't cling onto something here, I felt I would go insane.



So, I came to my own conclusion.

Alice had run away because she had done something shady.
Maybe... maybe Yukari's death hadn't been an accident.

I didn't have any solid proof, and I was going off pure emotional logic right now, but I clung desperately to this conclusion. I needed it. I needed something to fill this white, blank space in my head. I couldn't think at all right now, so I needed these burning emotions to help fill the blanks. I needed a goal.

And suddenly, I found my excuse for turning my back on a reality that I did not want to face. I felt a strange sense of satisfaction as these new thoughts formed.

If you want to run, then run, Alice.

Because I won't let you get away.

If you had a dark role to play in all this, then I'll chase you until I uncover the truth.

The sadness and despair can come after that.



"I'll definitely find Alice again. And she'll answer my questions. If she's not in Japan anymore, then I'll chase her all the way to America."

I mumbled idly, and another me responded.

"Yeah. But no, it's not just you who'll be chasing her. And it's not just me. It'll be *us*."

"Yes. Us. *We* will chase her."

"... Yes. And *we* will catch her."



After consulting with another me, I first went to Yukari's father.



I asked him to bring me along with him when he went to inspect Jaunt.

Of course, that would mean I would have to take a break from school.

Yukari's father was reluctant. My parents also didn't seem too fond of the idea. Being absent from school was not a good thing... and in the worst case scenario it might affect my exams scores too. My parents thought I had been studying for exams this entire time, so I couldn't blame them for thinking that way.

But I didn't back down.

Every single day, I barged into Yukari's home and made another direct appeal. I knew Yukari better than anyone, I would assert without a hint of shame in my voice. I would almost imply that Yukari and I had some secret agreement before she died (unfortunately, there was nothing of the sort). I would act as if I had taken on fulfilling Yukari's last requests and knew something about her death (of course I didn't, but I firmly believed that there was something strange about all this). I tried every single possible thing I could think of and begged him to take me along. I even implicitly threatened him. I even told them about how my left hand had now become a cell phone (of course, I couldn't offer any proof of that, so I'm rather doubtful that they believed me).

Yes, I tried every single possible method within reach.

The deciding blow came when I went out and got the paperwork for obtaining a passport.

I thrust that application in my own parents' faces and asked for their signature. And then I told them. Told them that if Yukari's father wouldn't take me along, then I would just go without anybody looking over me. *That if they thought I was bluffing, then they would regret underestimating me. I would try every single thing I could to get over there, and I would never give up.*

I always had a reputation for being stubborn, so my parents finally caved and went with me together to ask Yukari's father to take me along.

And thus, I was finally able to plot a path towards Jaunt.



How should I tell the next part of this story? It's rather difficult.

Well, maybe I should start from what happened.

Jaunt paid travel expenses for not only Yukari's parents, but for me as well, and even prepared a plane for us.

And soon we were flying away from Japan.

Our airplane soared through the night sky.

... and exploded above the Pacific Ocean.

Just before I died, I remember seeing the oxygen masks that had dropped from the ceiling, and the worried eyes of Yukari's mother as she looked back at me from the seat ahead.

But also... there was the faintly glowing display on my left hand.

And then, suddenly, my body was engulfed in scorching white...



I jumped to my feet in the midst of darkness.



I felt myself jolted awake by intense fury.

Yes, my anger was stronger right now than the shock of being killed. I couldn't feel anything else but rage.

I didn't believe for a millisecond that what had happened had been an accident.

To think they would blow up an entire airplane, I thought to myself.

Yes. In order to avoid an inspection, and in order to tie up any loose ends, Jaunt had done away with Yukari's family. They didn't even care that I had been on board, or about any of the other passengers,



and had made it look like an airplane accident.

It was a terrifying thought, but it wasn't out of the question considering they were an organization that raised children who were going around calling other people "commoners."

And if they had all these geniuses in their organization, then something like this certainly was within their capabilities...

They were demons. The lot of them.

But this made up my mind.

Jaunt was evil.

Yukari's death was also definitely not an accident; she was killed. By Jaunt.

And either way, they had killed me and Yukari's family too. They had probably tried to make Yukari do something, but Yukari had refused, and then...

"... Huh?"

I suddenly looked around.

This was..... my room? What?

I was lying down on my futon... but why? I was on the plane just a minute ago, right? Yes... I was on the plane... and then the plane started shaking suddenly...

Had that all been a dream?

And why was I so hungry?

I got out from under my futon and before I realized it I was reaching for my sweets. I opened the lid on a box of caramels while checking the date on the digital calendar atop my desk.

Yes... today was the day I was supposed to go with Yukari's parents to America, and right now I should've been on a plane...



"Wait, what in the world am I saying?"

I mumbled to myself as I fished through my head and finally remembered what was happening.

I had gone up to Yukari's parents and begged them to cancel their inspection.

Yukari's parents were pretty reluctant, but I was desperate. I told them to leave everything to me. I told them that I had some secret collaborators who could help me investigate what had happened, and so I begged them to call their trip off.

And after all that, what was the most unbelievable was that Yukari's parents agreed to trust me.

So of course we weren't on the plane. Of course nobody had died.

Ahh, this... this world is...

The cell phone in my left hand rang and I picked up the phone while chewing on a caramel.

"Hello?"

The me on the other line sounded like she was gasping for breath.

"Um, umm... hello?! Sorry for calling you so late. Were you asleep?"

"Nah. But *just like me, this is probably your second call for the day*, so I think it's best we keep this quick."

"W-Well, okay, then... did you feel it?"

"Yeah," I nodded.

Our memories were already shared at this point, so we understood each other, and understood what had happened.

"What happened back there... that was a different world where a different me had gone on the trip."

"Or a possibility where I had gone on the trip."



That had not been a dream. That had actually happened.

*But it had not been **determined**.*

It was born as a possibility and died as one, in a parallel world.

“So... we’re the ones who are in the worlds where we didn’t go on the inspection?”

“Yeah. There are probably some minor differences between your world and mine, but I think you’re right. Sorry... I’m getting a bit dizzy. You must be too, right? You should probably go eat something. I’ll do that too.”

“Y-Yeah, you’re right. Goodbye then...”

The call ended, and I popped a second caramel into my mouth. As I crushed it with my teeth, I felt my lips twist.

That me who had died was me, but the me right here was also me.

So... exactly who was I?

But that wasn’t what was important right now... *there was something more important here, right now.*

I couldn’t hold it in anymore as I began to laugh.



“... Jaunt is just really bad news. They blew up an entire airplane just to kill us? I mean, come on, that’s... that’s just way too...”

I listened to myself cower on the other end before responding with a smirk.

“Yeah. You’re right. Our opponent is powerful here. Now that I think back on it, Alice was going on and on about changing the world or some dangerous stuff like that, right? No... don’t get me wrong. I don’t think Alice did this. But they’re the ones who planted thoughts like that into the heads of children like Alice, right? Isn’t that just brainwashing? It’s really hard to forgive myself for not realizing this back then.”



"I agree. But that's not what's important right now."

"Indeed." I let out a laugh. "I admit that Jaunt is a powerful organization. They blew up an entire airplane, after all. I wouldn't think a small girl like me in junior high would ever be able to do anything against them."

After I spoke, the other me continued.

"But, I am not alone."

"An infinite number of me's are following along."

"In an infinite number of parallel worlds, through an infinite number of possibilities..."

"Do you remember what Tenjou told us before about the nature of light? What was it again? Fermat's Theory?"

"No no. Fermat's Principle. The idea that if light needs to traverse the space between two points, it will always take the path amongst all possible paths that takes the shortest amount of time."

It might sound a bit strange, but the nature of light made it so that when light had to get anywhere, it always chose the quickest path to get there.

If there are no obstacles in its path, then obviously the light would just go straight - that was the quickest path, after all.

But if there was water or atmosphere or gravity or any other obstacles in its path, then it was a different story.

For example, the speed of light in air was different from the speed of light in water.

Light moved more slowly in water, so when light had to travel through water, then going straight would force it to be in the water for a long time. Because of that, light would choose a bent trajectory. It would try to minimize the distance it had to travel through water, while still not taking any extra time in air. That was its quickest route.



To make an analogy, you could think of the water as a road backed up with traffic.

So even though it might be the shortest path, nobody wanted to just sluggishly chug forwards on a congested road. They would rather look for as many uncongested detours as possible. However, if they picked too many detours and looped all the way around, then they would end up taking more time and that would be counterproductive. So, they needed to avoid the traffic jam as much as possible while not taking too many detours, and find that route with just the perfect balance. Light was a master at using that method.

That was what was known as Fermat's Principle.

The strange thing about this principle was that it was almost as if light knew the destination point it was shooting for beforehand.

It went way deeper than that; it was almost like no matter what kind of obstacle or medium it had to traverse, light knew exactly how it would bend and attack each new object in its way, and it would ultimately choose the path that would bring it to its destination in the shortest time.

When the light began its journey, if it didn't know where all the roads were and where all the traffic jams were, then it shouldn't be able to pick the quickest route.

And yet, light would instantaneously find that route.

Why was light able to do that...?

Nanami had explained.

"Quantum physicists think the following: it's not that light is only taking the quickest route when it's trying to go from A to B, but it actually *simultaneously takes every possible route between A and B*. However, for every route other than the quickest route, the light rays interfere with each other and cancel each other out. So, in the end, only the light which took the quickest route is left. That's why it seems like light is always taking the fastest path between two points.

Yes. Because light is also a type of quantum, and can exhibit properties of both waves and particles."



That's why a ray of light could interfere with its own many possibilities, or with many parallel worlds.

It didn't know beforehand what path it was going to take to its destination, but as a quantum, it would simultaneously take every single path, and then ultimately only the correct, quickest path would be left.

That was the nature of light when described quantum mechanically.

"Do you understand?"

"All I have to do is to think about reaching Alice."

Yes.

I just had to become like light.

Just like light, I had to fixate on finding the fastest path between me and Alice.

If I did that, then every single me would be looking for Alice. Every single me in every single world would want to find her. And no matter how powerful and terrifying Jaunt was, it wouldn't matter anymore. Because I had as my ally all the infinite possibilities, all the infinite parallel worlds. And all the me's out there could mutually interact through this cell phone.

"This shouldn't be that difficult. After all, it's not like light understands Fermat's Principle or how to solve Feynman path integrals. Light is just light. And that's all it has to be to find the quickest path to its destination. So I shouldn't think too hard about this either. I had to think only about reaching my goal. That's what I had to become. And if I did that, then someday, one of the infinite me's will have to find the right answer... and then only the right answer will be left."

"Just like how now, only the me's that didn't die in that plane crash are left."



“Only the right answer won’t be negated, and only the right answer will be left.”

Yes. I would become like light.

I would use this cell phone, this gift from Yukari.

And first, I would definitely reach Alice.

Yes. *That came first.*

Anger was a wonder drug when it came to curing sorrow.

It was also a poison, but because of it, I could get from day to day while keeping my chest from bursting apart.

And even if it was a poison, as usual I quickly adapted myself to it.

... At this point, I probably had already stopped being “Hatou Manabu.”



I've fallen in love before.

Yes, I've fallen in love... and I did think it was love. But I never got married. And I wasn't sad when we broke apart. In some sense, you could say marriage was the goal of life - of course, I have no intention of arguing against people who think differently (and I in fact am in their camp) - but I had my own goal that I could never forget. I went to college, got a job, and started working freelance. There were times when I did volunteer work, times when I found myself completely ruined. I've suffered from a broken heart, but then found someone else to love, but through all this my desire to reach my goal never faded.

There were also times when I stood in the park and watched children play, and for some reason during those times I would feel myself tear up.

In one world, I lived until forty-seven, while in another world I died at fifteen. I died at fifteen seven times. I died at sixteen three times - and most of those times I had been murdered. I once smuggled myself out of the country. It was not something a girl should be doing. I also knew that America was a country that prized self-defense. I learned how to shoot a gun, and also learned how to handle myself in a fight. But the one thing I could depend on in the end was my own stamina, and I thanked the heavens that I had never stopped practicing the naginata since I was a child (at that time I didn't notice the inconsistency). I felt the set of values I ascribed to and thought would never change do just that, and readily.



One me got permission from Yukari's parents to cross over into America.

One me graduated from junior high and then went abroad immediately.

One me went into a Japanese high school, and then a Japanese college, and tried to reel in my goal inch by inch.

There were times when I would just be completely sick of the lack of progress every day. There were times when I wanted to toss everything I had done out the window.

But through all of this, always and forever, my goal was my everything.

I wanted someone I could depend on, and I fell in love. And you might be surprised, but I fell in love with Kasoku Tomonori. I dated him, and then I was shocked to find out that he had dated Nanami before me. We broke up afterwards.

All of this was my life.

There might be people who question what one could actually hope to accomplish by studying qualia.

It doesn't get you anything at all to go off in search for qualia, they might say.

But there are people who might respond thusly:

It was precisely qualia that made life something worth living.

When I looked back on my life - and there were many of them - I found that I was quite satisfied with how those lives had gone. I might have suffered through some cruel times and done many pointless things, but after all was said and done, I honestly felt quite content. In fact, none of my lives in any world seemed very bad, as far as I could tell.

However, I still had a goal.



And any me who could not accomplish that goal was just another possibility that I had no use for.

So, every single time, I just casually tossed those possibilities away.

Yes, I felt that at some point, I had started straying from the proper path in some way.

But even so, I couldn't stop.



Ultimately, the world that I chose was the one in which I notified Jaunt about my left hand.

After Yukari's funeral, I made contact with Jaunt. And then I acted the part. Acted the part of a girl who had come to terms with Yukari's death and was trying to move on.

Acted the part of a girl who was bewildered by her own abilities which were awakened thanks to Yukari's purple eyes.

Jaunt knew all too well about those purple eyes, and they quickly came to verify what I had told them.

I couldn't use this cell phone in front of people, but I allowed them to check my body and make sure that I wasn't holding onto anything, nor did I have any electronics buried inside my body, before dialing a call out from an empty container box.

Everything went off without a hitch, and Jaunt recruited me just as I wanted.

There was no doubt in my mind that this was the fastest route for me to my goal.

After I graduated junior high, I moved to the Jaunt school.

I reached my goal... reached Alice, and learned the truth.

Alice cried as she apologized to me.



"Sorry. Sorry. Sorry..."

"Don't worry. It's fine."

Jaunt had never recruited Yukari because they wanted to protect and nurture her. They had always wanted to use her eyes to do something (Alice never knew about this).

And, just as I had imagined, Yukari had refused them.

So, to force her to cooperate, Jaunt had performed horrible experiments on her.

However, what they had not taken into account was the fact that Yukari was not that much stronger than a normal child.

So Yukari quickly broke, and realizing that this was the end of the road, the Jaunt scientists dissected her for the sake of their research.

And just like people had done with Einstein, they extracted Yukari's brain and preserved it in formalin...

"Sorry... sorry... sorry... sorry..."

"It's fine. I know you tried your best..."

I tried to comfort Alice while stroking her on the head as she hugged me tight and repeated the same word over and over again like a broken toy.

I combed my hand through her hair, hair which had black parts now prominently showing through (had she forgotten to dye it because of all this stress?) and I began to think.

It's really fine, Alice.

Because I knew.

Ultimately, it was not an easy task to get Alice to talk.

In one world, I tried to persuade Alice by breaking into tears.

In one world, I threatened Alice.



In one world I begged her for her cooperation, in another I forced her to submit to me, in another I betrayed her, in another I tortured her. Just as I had crossed the ocean, I had also crossed a line of humanity. In one world I felt nauseous, but in one world I enjoyed myself. In one world it was like I didn't feel anything anymore, and I just looked down at Alice's still body as I stepped on it.

I would have never guessed that I was capable of doing such things... but these were my possibilities that I could not deny.

All those possibilities eventually led me to this world - the world in which I managed to persuade Alice.

Because I knew. I knew the truth.

... Hey, Alice. I know everything. I know about you, about your name and your mother. About your pride, your past trauma, your kindness. About how you tried to protect Yukari, tried to save her. About how despite all that, you couldn't do anything.

So in this world, I would forgive you.

And in one world, I would love you.

In one world, I would hate you.

In one world, I would save you, in one world I would push you away, in one world I would support you, in one world I would break you, betray you, use you for my own purposes.

For the sake of the next, new goal I had found.

If even a small part of Yukari's body was left, then I would take it back.

And on the way, I would find the people who did this to Yukari, and I would make them answer my questions.

Would make them tell me when and exactly how Yukari died.

And then all together with all the infinite worlds and infinite possibilities, I would make them feel the absolute highest level of pain--

And just like a beam of light, I set off on my task.



Although, just a few days later, this goal I had vowed to accomplish began quickly dropping lower and lower on my priority list, to be replaced by a different goal.



It all began on one night, when I received a call from myself.

The subject of the call was something so ridiculous that I didn't even want to remember it.

However, I do remember heaving a huge sigh of relief at the knowledge that nobody else was listening in on this particular phone conversation.

Sorry for repeating myself, but... no, nevermind.

By the way, at this point I was already attending the Jaunt school, and even though Jaunt had provided a single room in their dorm for me, Alice came over almost every single night.

She usually acted so sharp and chic, and she often backed me up when I got into tight spots from not being able to speak English too well (I mean, sure everyone at this school might be a genius, but the only student here who could speak Japanese was Alice), but when we were alone she would suddenly act much more childish and start being really affectionate towards me.

She had just recently celebrated her thirteenth birthday, and yet the minute I took my eyes off her she would start sucking on her thumb, almost as if she had regressed to a much younger child. It was rather awkward, and quite honestly a bit annoying, but because I still had some use for her I couldn't treat her too cruelly. The situation had filled me with quite a bit of pent up stress.



Jaunt didn't seem to mind even if Alice and I hung out together.

They were still suspicious of me, and a bit wary of Alice (I had already checked this in another world), but maybe they saw the value in my left hand, because they were content to just carefully observe us from the sidelines.

By the way, remember that I couldn't use my cell phone when others were watching (this was ultimately more of a guiding principle though, and there were exceptions to this rule).

But to put that in another way, when I was using my cell phone, I knew that there was nobody watching me.

This was extremely useful for me.

In other words, when I got a call to my left hand today, I knew that I wasn't being watched, and that Alice was really asleep.

I had been trying to keep these calls to a bare minimum, so the fact that I was getting one now might mean that something had happened. I picked up the call.

"Hello? What's wrong?"

The me on the other end spoke in a strangely restless tone.

"... Ah, umm, sorry. Umm, actually, it's not like much has happened, and this is kinda just a personal thing, but I wanted some advice."

"... P-Personal thing? What?"

The other me seemed to ignore my hesitation and just said it straight.

"... Yeah. Umm, well, to tell you the truth...

I think I'm in love."

... The minute those words passed into my ear, I felt my entire mind going blank.

But that was only for a moment, and in the next moment I felt the other me's knowledge and experiences welling up in my already baffled mind.

"... Hey, w-wait a sec... what in the world are you thinking?!"

"So what? What do you care if I fall in love? What's it matter? There are plenty of other worlds where I'm dating Kasoku around now, right?"

"That's not it! You know exactly what's wrong too! I mean... w-wait wait wait. Hold on... no, you're definitely wrong! You're confused! You're just confusing it with motherly instincts or something! I mean... uhh... that's..."

You know Alice is a girl, right?"

I really didn't want to know this, but our shared knowledge and memories had already told me all too clearly - told me exactly who this other me had fallen in love with. And told me how sincere her feelings were.

... Uwah, this was bad.

This girl... no, I had fallen in love... with a child, and a girl...

"Got a problem with it?"

"Of course! It's Alice! A kid! A girl! Also, I mean, even if I gave you a millimeter of leeway here... no, I won't even give you that! You pervert! What are you thinking?! What kinds of bad karma are you trying to bring down on all of us?! Anyways! That's definitely not love! It definitely isn't!"

"So, not love... then it's... infatuation?"

"Ugh, you're so annoying! Also, out of all the people you could've fallen in love with, why Alice? Why such an annoying little kid like that?"

"What are you saying?! Alice is really cute!"

Uwah, she's yelling at me now...



I was completely taken aback, but even so the other me continued rattling on and on in complete seriousness.

"What's wrong with Alice?! She's really pretty, and also really brave, and even though she's that small she always tries so hard! And umm, also, well, she always acts so harsh but then she comes and relies on me so much, and that's... well, whatever. In any case, no matter what any other me says to me, I really think this is love. Also, now that I realized I'm in love, I can't just stay silent about it anymore. So, I'm going to... definitely..."

"Don't say it. I already know what you want to say, so just don't say it out loud. Ugh... some of my possibilities are just... terrifying..."

... Was this other me also me?

I mean, certainly, given that these were possibilities and given that there were infinite parallel worlds, then it wasn't entirely out of the question that a me like this would exist somewhere...

I was at a loss for words while the other me muttered vacantly.

"... Can you really not understand this side of me?"

"... Huh? No, this is impossible... or maybe it's not entirely impossible, but it's definitely very unlikely."

"No, that's not what I mean. I mean, looking back, even with Yukari and Tenjou, I get the feeling I've sometimes looked at them kinda like-"

"Go die! Go die you pervert! Don't dirty up my memories!"

"Well, why don't you try to remember? Remember when we met Yukari? Did it really feel that bad when she kissed us all of a sudden?"

"Stop it! That wasn't a kiss! She just ran into me! Also, weren't you the one who mentioned that lots of us are dating Kasoku?! And... I mean... those me's also went all the way too! And those relationships were perfectly fine! In fact, I think they were more than fine... I mean..."

“Yes. But that wasn’t *you*, and that wasn’t *me*. You understand, right? Of course, that was just another possibility in another parallel world, and in a sense it was ‘me,’ but that doesn’t change things, does it?”

... Yes, she was right.

The me who dated Kasoku was “me,” but also wasn’t me at the same time.

And this pervert I was talking to also wasn’t me, but was “me” at the same time.

... Everything will be fine. Just accept it, me. The minute I found another me like this, I already had adapted myself to it, and I still can go on like this... probably. Although it wasn’t like I really wanted to go on like this...

I heaved a sigh.

“Anyways, no matter how cute she is... and even leaving aside the fact that she’s a girl and a child... that’s pretty convenient how you chose someone you were planning to use as a tool as the one you fell in love with.”

“What are you saying? I don’t think of Alice as a tool. We became friends again, and we decided to try hard and work together.”

Right when she said that, I felt my memories refresh... I felt the other me’s memories flow into me... and then I understood what she meant.

This other me was different from me.

I had appealed to Alice’s conscience and wrung the truth out of her, and after that in order to make use of her I had forgiven her... or at least I pretended to. After that, I had *deliberately* fostered a relationship in which she would one-sidedly begin to depend on me.

But on the other hand, this other me had told Alice her own feelings, gotten Alice to understand her, and had really become friends with Alice. Such good friends, in fact, that she had fallen in love with Alice.



That's why the Alice in her world did not suck on her thumb like the Alice in this one.

Unlike my Alice, her Alice was proudly self-reliant, and had become a big help to this other me.

... To be honest, I felt rather jealous.

That sounds pretty nice, I admitted to myself.

And it was possible, but maybe the me on that side was a bit closer to accomplishing my-...

"No! No way! That's definitely not true! I'm the calm one here! I'm the one who's gonna be able to get everything done!"

"Do you understand what 'calm' means? I don't mean to impose, but if you're doing bad things like trying to use someone like a tool and manipulate them, then that's only going to come back and bite you later."

"Shut up! So, is that all you wanted to talk about? If so, I'll-"

"Ah, right right. I had something I wanted to ask too. Well, it's about my... or I should say *your* junior high days..."

Suddenly, the line went dead.

In order to feign calm, I looked around the room as naturally as possible.

I heard a grumpy moan and I turned to look at Alice on my bed.

It seemed I had woken her...

"... Hm? Hatou? Where... where am I right now?"

"My room. You can keep sleeping if you want, you know? It's already night."

Alice had sat up in the bed, and looked like she was mumbling something for a bit before finally lying back down on her side.

After a little while, I heard her speak again, her voice hesitant.

“... Hatou... are you not sleeping yet?”

“Nah... sorry. Just give me a bit more.”

“..... I will not force you to, but staying up too late is bad for your skin. You are not young anymore.”

“Well, I mean, I’m older than you certainly, but I’m still sixteen, you know.”

“That is still not a good reason to stay up late.”

Alice almost seemed to be sulking as she said that before she turned her back on me. I felt myself calm down at seeing Alice behaving so cutely, and then I let out a sigh.

Ahh, she certainly acted pretty harsh all the time, but Alice definitely was cute...

But despite that.

*To think that I would get called a pervert, and by **myself** no less.*

I stared at my palm and thought about the me I was talking with.

Since junior high, I’ve always wondered whether these conversations were with one of my possibilities or with another me in a parallel world, but I still didn’t have an answer to that question.

Well, either way, I would never talk on the phone with the same me again, so it really didn’t make a difference.

-- They say that there is a shortest unit of time, and scientists call that the Planck time.

To be precise, this is the shortest period of time that humans can actually observe, and theoretically, in the period of every Planck time that elapses, our possibilities or our parallel worlds are given form and destroyed. In other words, it might be that during every Planck time, I become probabilistic and my wave function collapses, or I interact with the other parallel worlds... at least, that’s what Alice told me after we made up and became friends again.



I approached the bed and watched Alice as she slept on my bed, leaving me just enough space to crawl in if I wanted. I felt my chest fill with affection.

And then I felt myself getting more and more annoyed... annoyed at the me I had just talked to on the phone.

That other me... she was me, and yet she still called such a cute girl like Alice annoying... called her a tool.

Well, I guess I can't get too angry. After all, it sounded like the me in that world hadn't truly made up with Alice.

In other words, this me and that me had divergent pasts...

I realized it then. I realized it after thinking about what Alice had taught me.

That call from before had cut off, but I had shared memories with that other me and had been able to check.

This meant that in all the worlds and possibilities born from now on, all the other me's would realize it too.

I let out another sigh and called out to Alice before softly slipping into bed beside her and hugging her to me in place of a pillow.

It seemed that Alice was still awake, and she moved slightly in response, but she didn't say anything.

I hugged her even tighter, and then muttered inside my heart.

Thank you, Alice. Thank you for teaching me these things, and thank you for helping me.

And... I'm sorry.

I really do love you, but I cannot betray the goal I had set out to fulfill.



"Are you listening?"

"Yeah, I'm listening. Please continue."

"I believe that we might be able to change the past."



Everything started when I realized that I was treating Alice differently in different worlds.

In this world, I fell in love with Alice.

In another world, I ended up hating Alice.

In another world, I thought of Alice as a tool. Another me didn't feel anything at all about it, while another me was very ambivalent about it and never made up her mind...

These parallel worlds all seemed the same, but they were also different in some places.

Possibilities were meaningful only because they each were different. They existed only to differ from one another.

It was impossible for the same possibility to emerge twice. And so, it was natural there would be differences.

However, exactly where did these differences stem from?

In Alice's case, the answer was obvious. I ended up treating Alice differently depending on how exactly I learned the truth about Yukari's death from her. Had I threatened her? Had I tried to persuade her? Had I tried to appeal to her conscience, or had I forgiven her? This branching out was so patently obvious for me that up until now I had never really questioned it.



These worlds had diverged in the past, and that's why different me's now treated Alice differently.

"... But, do you remember what Alice said? Whether we're talking about infinite possibilities or infinite parallel worlds, all these divergences have to happen *from here*. Quanta don't have well-defined continuous pasts, and they also don't have futures we can predict. All they have is their present, a length of a Planck time isolated from all other points of history."

"Where are you going with this?"

"In other words, my present self can always become a point of divergence. But not only for the future... that divergence can affect the past as well.

Indeed, it would be wrong to say that the past is what determines the differences in our present worlds.

Rather, first we are all given form, and then our differences propagate divergences both into the future and into the past. It would be incorrect to say that first I made up with Alice, and that is why I began to like her. Rather, first there was an alternate world or a different possibility created in which I liked Alice, and in order to realize that possibility, a divergence propagated into the past which then made it so I had made up with Alice. Forget everything you know about how things normally work. No longer does cause produce effect. Rather, effect becomes a guidepost for causality to follow.

Do you remember what I did back in junior high for Yukari's sake?"

"Yes, of course. I wanted to be prepared in case something happened, so I practiced the naginata. And that's definitely helped me out of a lot of tough spots..."

Yes, exactly.

I wanted to be prepared, so I made sure to keep up my training with the naginata. Until I joined Jaunt in the present I had never stopped, and because of that I managed to get out of quite a few difficult situations. If my body weren't in peak physical shape, then I could have never made it this far. However...



"Then tell me this. *Where did I learn all this information about quantum mechanics?*"

"..... Eh?"

"We stopped, remember? I'm pretty sure you do. After Yukari transferred away from our school, I stopped keeping up with the naginata and just started reading books. For almost a year I didn't practice the naginata at all, and actually got quite a bit out of shape, but *right now I'm in such good physical condition that you can't tell I had stopped training at all.* So, what happened to that chunk of my past when I was studying?"

"... That's..."

"Back then, what I wanted to prepare for is being able to join Jaunt. That's why I was studying so hard. Remember? Back then, I would've never thought that Yukari would be killed. So there would've been no reason to 'prepare' by toughening my body up. So therein lies a contradiction.

Right now, my body is definitely in good shape...

... Yes, in order to learn the truth behind Yukari's death, I needed a body that could move around easily, a body with a lot of stamina.

So I changed the past.

I abandoned the past in which I had studied hard, and chose the past in which I had continued my physical training.

All of our knowledge is shared, so I never noticed. But this is purely just me not noticing, and I am sure there are various other cases in which I changed the past. Without knowing it. This applies to how we treat Alice as well. Do you understand?"

"... So, *all of us* can not only create divergences into the future, but also into the past?"

"Yes. In other words, if we can create just the right divergence into the past..."

"We can create a world in which Yukari is still alive right now."



I mentioned before that I had a feeling I was straying from the proper path in some way.

That I was missing something important here.

But even if that were true, there were no other options open to me.

“Do you really think we can do this?”

“Why not? We’ve studied this, haven’t we? And remember, from a physics perspective, the past and the future can be described in identical terms. So if we can change the future, then it would make no sense if the same didn’t apply to the past.”

“But, if I change the past, then wouldn’t there be paradoxes and stuff like that...? I mean, wouldn’t I... or all of us... wouldn’t we just disappear?”

“I don’t think so. Wave function collapse, losing the ability to interact with parallel worlds... those are all irreversible processes. So we can’t just suddenly stop existing. And when I get information on the other me’s out there... all that is possible because of wave function collapse or this loss of interactivity... I wouldn’t be able to get that information any other way. So in that sense, maybe we could consider ourselves some form of quantum teleportation, and that’s why we can share our knowledge and experiences... or maybe not. I’m a complete physics novice, after all, so take everything I’m saying with a grain of salt. To be honest, I can’t say for sure what will happen. But, there is certainly one thing that I can say right now.

And that certainty is that we decided we would move forwards like light. Right?”

Yes, exactly.

That was precisely what we had decided. We would move forwards like light.

We would try every single possible path, would find the quickest path that would lead us to the right answer, and that right answer would take us to our goal.

I had thought that the path I had been walking was already *determined* with certainty.



And I had thought that path was the correct one.

But I had been wrong. Just wrong. The path I had launched myself onto had been the wrong one for accomplishing my goal from the very beginning.

I had been so focused on knowing the truth behind Yukari's death and exacting revenge on those who had brought that death about, but those were never anything but secondary goals. But even when I realized what my true goal should've been, I thought the route I was on was already determined with certainty. And yet, that route was only one of many divergent routes; it was only one possibility that was not determined at all, and in fact was a possibility ultimately meant to be discarded.

I thought I had opened the box with the cat inside.

But in reality, that box was still closed. I just had the mere intention to open it. That was all.

This world had not been determined yet.

And if I could not reach the correct answer by following this world, then I had no use for it.

"Yes, that is what I am."

I had never had a choice in the matter to begin with.

I cut off the call and looked towards the bed.

I stared at Alice's face for a little bit as she slept.

I softly approached her face with my own.

And planted a gentle kiss on her eyelid.

Sorry. And thank you, Alice.

I love you, but I have to move forwards. So...



"Goodbye."

"..... And so,"



"Good luck from here on out, 'me.'"

"Leave it to me."

I cut the phone call off and rubbed the corner of my eyes.

But even so, the tears just wouldn't stop.

I couldn't make heads nor tails of those tears; they were some mixture of both sadness and joy. But as they fell, I quietly looked around the room.

Around *my room*.

Not the dorm room that Jaunt had prepared for me in America, but at my room back in Japan.

I tried to restrain my rapidly beating heart as I checked my desktop calendar.

Not willing to believe what I saw just yet, I turned on the TV and searched for the news.

I caught a glance of my face reflecting back at me on the television screen, and noticed something was a bit off... I looked for a mirror, and was treated to the sight of a slightly younger version of myself.

The date showing on the TV news program was a date etched into my memory - it was the date I first got a call from myself at night.

The night right before I had uttered those words that had driven Yukari to her ultimate decision.

And of course it was.



If I didn't change the past from this day, then I wouldn't be able to save her.

So... all the other possibilities, and all the other worlds... you can just go and disappear.

Ideally, I had wanted to switch with a me in a world where Yukari was already saved, but it seemed like things wouldn't be that easy (honestly, I couldn't really imagine what a world like that would look like anyways). But I digress.

"I... came back..."

That phone call I had received definitely had been from a future me.

But that had been the first time I had received such a call, and without the right knowledge or experience I had no hope of understanding it.

However, now things were different. I had the knowledge and experiences from infinite worlds at my back.

So now... I could do it.

Not able to hold myself back anymore, I leapt into bed and buried my face into my pillow.

Tears leaked out more and more onto my pillowcase as I rubbed my face into it. I screamed to myself on the inside.

In this world, Yukari was still alive.

And I could save her.

This time, I would definitely do things right.



It was morning the next day.



I rushed to Yukari's house as soon as I could, and for the first time in a long, long, time... for the first time after what felt like eternities across infinite worlds... I was able to see Yukari. I couldn't help myself and pulled her into a hug.

I hugged her tight.
I just couldn't stop myself.

Afterwards, we set off for school and I faced off with Alice and told her what I needed to tell her straight to her face (to be honest, I was pretty shaken when I saw her... but at this point I had memories of hating her, liking her, supporting her, killing her... none of those memories might've seemed very real to me right now, but they still made it hard for me to remain calm). I told her that I would never let Yukari move away.

Yukari's sake? Protecting her? Those words that had echoed through my head back then now rang all the more hollow.

I didn't give Alice a single inch, and even though she upgraded me from a commoner to a "super commoner" (I get the feeling that was a bit of an oxymoron though), I paid her no mind, denouncing Jaunt as a training camp for terrorists while acting like I pitied her for being such a gullible child. And then, I never left Yukari's side for the entire day. I growled like some kind of animal at anybody who tried to interfere with us, and even scared our teacher off. It seemed I had picked up quite an aura after experiencing all those infinite worlds. And by showing my wild side to everyone else through that day, I feel I also did a remarkable amount of damage to the reputation Hatou Manabu had as a "calm and collected girl."

But I honestly couldn't care less about any of that.

Because Yukari was by my side right now.

Because I could pull her into my embrace right now.

This time, I would definitely protect her...



Alice stayed in our class until the end of the third school period, and then returned to Jaunt in low spirits.



And Yukari became a third year student.

She didn't transfer out, but remained by my side.

I had beat Alice back, had made Jaunt retreat, and had truly managed to protect Yukari...



Less than half a year later, Yukari was abducted by somebody and I lost all track of her whereabouts.

By the time I managed to find her again, her body had already grown cold.



I had to ask the following question:

“Why can’t I just be like light?”

“Eh?”

“I mean, I haven’t been doing a good job of it, right? Light doesn’t have to go through all this trial and error like me. Light can just try every single path simultaneously and get rid of the bad paths by making them destructively interfere. And then only the shortest, correct path is left. Only the correct path is left, and all of this takes a single instant. There’s no calculating, no anything. And yet, why can’t I do the same thing? If I have to keep ruling out each and every single possibility and each and possible world out of an infinite number of possible choices, then I’d have to be a quantum computer to ever get to the right answer!”

“Yes, indeed. And although I might not be light, I am a certain kind of quantum computer. So if I just keep trying, then someday...”

“Right, I’m a quantum computer! The quantum nature of the universe lets me use all the infinite me’s in all the infinite worlds to think and make calculations! My brain is nothing other than a quantum computer! But then why?! Why can’t I find the answer, an answer that should become apparent in just an instant?! I know that the answer is somewhere, but...”

“... Well, the problem is probably *the problem*.”



This other me answered me with a tone of quiet resignation.

"If we understood the question, then we could find the answer. But we do not know that question, and so the answer is not forthcoming. Because we do not even understand what we should be answering. Indeed, 'saving Yukari' is a goal and not an answer, and if we do not understand the problem itself, then we have no hope of extracting an answer."

"... So I do not understand the problem I should be solving in the first place..."

I knew there was a problem.

I definitely had the feeling I was doing something wrong somewhere.

But I did not know where and what the problem itself was.



I tried doing everything I could.

I spent the entire school day with Yukari, and always walked her to and from her house in the morning and evening. Sometimes I even slept over at her place. But I still was unable to keep Yukari from being kidnapped. No matter how many allies I had in how many parallel worlds, no matter how many different worlds I visited and how much knowledge and experience I accrued, I was, of course, just a mere junior high student. I was powerless, and I had no time.

If I had more time, then I could've crushed Jaunt.

But before I could do anything like that, Yukari was always kidnapped and then killed.

I tried everything possible. I told Yukari's parents that she was being targeted and got them to reinforce their home security. But Yukari was kidnapped. They hired a personal bodyguard for her. But Yukari was killed. I leaked information about Yukari's powers to the press and made her famous around the world. But all that ended up doing was hurting Yukari and provoking Nanami, and in the end I still couldn't prevent Yukari's death.



I tried exposing Jaunt to the public, tried getting people to go there and inspect the facility, but Yukari was kidnapped and dissected.

No matter how much I rushed, no matter how much I prepared, each time I tried to play my hand, Yukari ended up dead and her brain in a jar. It was like someone was laughing at me this entire time. And I felt like I was playing a game. Yes, it's my turn now. And now it's Jaunt's turn. Oops, I lost. What did I lose? Yukari's life, of course. That's what I get for being powerless.

Yukari was alive right now, and was by my side.

But I couldn't save her... I just couldn't save her. She would be killed. Killed by how powerless I was. I wouldn't make it in time, and she would be killed. I knew what was going to happen, but she would be killed nonetheless. I was completely helpless to stop the same thing from happening over and over again. She would be killed. I couldn't protect her, and she would keep being killed. It was all my fault. Trial and error. Every single time, trial and error, forever and ever, trial and error...

... Ahh, God, please hear my prayers.

I was in Hell right now.



I killed Alice once.

I was caught and sent to a juvenile correctional facility. I didn't need that world. I went back and killed Alice again. This time I thought I got away with it, but they found me again. So I tossed that world aside too. I killed Alice again. This third time, I finally realized why I was killing her. Yukari died because Alice came to Japan. So if I got rid of Alice, then I could avoid all that. So I got rid of her. But as soon as I did that, another one to replace Alice came. So I got rid of that one too, and then they found me again. Trial and error. Trial and error. I kept on going until I got away with it all.

Finally, I managed to make it so that nobody transferred to our school anymore.



This time, for sure, Yukari wouldn't die.

... But I was naive.

Yukari was once again kidnapped, and this time I was even killed in the process.

Trial and error. From the beginning again...



Sometimes, I called another me and spoke in resignation.

"... Maybe it's just impossible to save Yukari. Maybe this is just all fate."

"... Fate?"

"Yeah, fate. I mean, everything started from when Yukari died, right? I'm like how I am right now because of her death. So her death was what created me as I am now. *If Yukari is alive, then this me would not exist. So...*

That might be why I can go back into the past.

That might be why I can change the past and the future.

But, I would never be able to change fate... to change a fate that had already been observed. So maybe Yukari's death had already been *determined*, and since I am someone who was created from that determination... or I should say as long as *anybody* created from that determination exists, then I won't be able to save her..."

"Sure... that might be true, and that might not be. To be honest, I can't really say for sure. But there is one thing I can say..."

I don't need any me who wants to give up. *So go and disappear."*

I hung up the phone and let out a sigh.

Let's start from the beginning again.

Let's start and go as light, traversing every single possible path.



In order to find the one right answer.

That was already what I was.



One day, I suddenly realized something.

If I didn't have enough time to save Yukari, then I should just make enough time.

It was because I started from here... from the point of that first phone call that I found myself running out of time. So I should just go back further. I already went back in time once, so I could do it again. Yes, go back further... go back to before Jaunt was created.

I had already used my memories from all the parallel worlds to look into Jaunt. I found that they weren't created too long ago, and actually as an organization was younger than I was.

They were formidable because they were an organization.

So I just had to prevent them from forming that organization.

If I started from before Jaunt was formed, I could also take my time and my enemies would be weak. This was the very definition of killing two birds with one stone.

"... Wait wait. Going back even further... you're going to make a small child fight?"

"Age has nothing to do with it. We all share our knowledge and experiences, so it'll be fine. Actually, a small child might put our enemies off their guard, so it's a pretty huge advantage for us."

"But, going that far back... that's before we met Yukari, right? Our left hand was still normal back then."

"... What are you saying after all this time?"

I let out a derisive chuckle and began to inform this me who lacked all too much self-awareness.



“Can’t you see? This ‘cell phone’ of ours was nothing more than the spark that lit a fire. It’s convenient and we still use it, but in reality we do not need it at all. After all, I am already *like that*. I have already been fixed to be *like that* long ago. What’s important are the results. We can just slap whatever interpretation we want onto how we got there.

And okay then. Do you have any other suggestions?”

“..... No.”

“Then stop nitpicking and let’s try every single possible thing that we could possibly try.”

I cut off the phone call, and began to dial out again.

Consecutive use of this cell phone would drain quite a lot of stamina, but I didn’t mind. At any rate, I had no use for this world anymore.

All I needed was the possibility to save her. *I didn’t even need myself any longer.*

“..... And so,”



“Good luck from here on out, ‘me.’”

“Leave it to me.”

I let out an exaggerated sigh and cut off the call to my toy phone.

I was really surprised when what was supposed to be a toy phone started ringing, but that was natural. I had just turned five, after all. So nobody could blame me if I got a bit frightened or even if I almost wet my pants over something like this.

But more importantly...

“You know, I got lotsa knowledge and ekschperience, but if I can’t use it right, it doesn’t mean anything! I guess it’s true you get more smarter when you get older!”



I shook my head and thought about the fourteen-year-old me.

I thought even further, to the sixteen-year-old me.

And then I thought of myself as a twenty-year-old (twenty?) and then of myself as a thirty-year-old (... thirty!), remembering details of lives in various faraway worlds in which I was old almost beyond imagining.

All of them were useless.

"Hey, *me*. Remember that you gotta think outside the box here, okay?"

The reason why all these me's had failed before was because we were only thinking about possibilities that lay on a straight, vertical line.

I had access to all the infinite parallel worlds out there, but I was exploring them with one hand tied behind my back.

But I wouldn't make the same mistake twice. Possibilities admitted no boundaries. All I had to do was to be flexible.

The results were the only thing that mattered. As long as I *fixed* the *results*, then the *path* that led to those results would just come into existence from somewhere.

I felt butterflies in my stomach as I pushed a button on my toy phone.

"Hello?"

And soon, another me answered.

"Yes! Hello!"

"... You hafta know what I want here, right? You see everything going on in my head, right?"

"Yeah! You're looking for a certain me in a parallel world! Sorry though, I'm the wrong one. But keep trying!"



“Okay.” I nodded and hung up the phone before dialing again.

Right now, I’m sure all the me’s in all the parallel worlds were dialing their phones together. Just thinking about that made my heart race.

Because of that, it probably wouldn’t take long before I found the right me.

Yes, I would find that me.

If I was powerless to face Jaunt, then I would just find a me that had power.

For example... *a me that could use magic.*

If there really were an infinite number of parallel worlds, then there must be at least one world in which I could use magic.

And if I could find just one, then from that point that world would become the *standard* for other worlds.

This was the way I should’ve always used the power of infinite possibilities.

“Hello!”

“Yeah, leave it to me! *I can definitely do this!*”

Yes, *for me, this was possible...* and honestly, I’ve always wanted to try this anyways.

Becoming a magical girl, I mean.



How could I now use magic, you ask?



Instead of magic, you could say “superpowers” instead. And honestly, neither the reason nor the path that got me to this point matter. Maybe it was some kind of mutation, or maybe some external source changed my genetic code, or maybe it was even something else. There were infinite possibilities, but the only thing that mattered was the result.

First, I started by looking for me’s who thought they could do magic.

The minute I found a me like that, all the me’s became like that.

And then, I looked for the me’s who actually *could* do something.

And the minute I found a me like that, once again all the me’s became like that. Theory? Reason? Don’t care. Don’t need any of that. The ends would create the means. Whether you believed in the Copenhagen interpretation or the Many Worlds interpretation, the end result was the same. Just slap whatever useful theory you wanted onto it (even in physics, the only reason the Copenhagen interpretation was the most popular one was because it was simply more convenient than the Many Worlds interpretation). So I just needed to think flexibly. I just needed to innocently demand results without thinking about the means to get there.

The next step was to find a me that actually had a useful power.

At that point, I had to actually go and try these powers out for myself, but I had all the time in the world, and all the worlds as well, for that matter. So I would be fine. Someday, I would definitely reach my goal...

In one world, I was discovered shooting fire from my fingers and taken to the hospital.

In one world, I failed at teleportation and melded into a wall, killing myself.

In one world, I was seen flying through the sky, and I was captured by the Japanese Self Defense Force or some organization like that.

I needed a costume. So that nobody would be able to figure out who I was. So that I could still be seen in public and not care.



My experiences in every single world became my sustenance, and all the myriad possibilities became my weapons...

“The magical girl Magical Maruchipuru Mana-chan is here at last!”

And so, Magical Maruchipuru Mana-chan began her work, wishing in her heart that she could meet and become friends with Yukari as soon as possible.

... To be honest, there were worlds in which I got so impatient that I went to meet Yukari immediately (well it's not like you can blame me - let me just remind you all that I was a five year old right now, so I was pretty direct when it came to my own desires).

But, no matter what I tried, all that I ended up doing was getting Yukari and Nanami taken hostage to lure me out, and I ended up getting them involved in all kinds of messes. So I just tearfully decided that I would stop trying to meet Yukari at this age.

I would try to meet them again after I had finished everything I had set out to do.

If I could just accomplish my goals properly, then I would have nothing left to worry about.

So, let's hurry up and clean this mess up.

“No mercy for bad people!”

Jaunt was a huge organization, but just like a lion or an elephant, in its infancy it was quite powerless. So this was quite like taking candy from a baby.

I first went around beating up all the future founding members of Jaunt - the people whose initials would eventually form the word J-A-U-N-T.



I carefully and meticulously dealt with the root of the problem.

None of those people seemed to understand why all these bad things were happening to them, and that honestly annoyed me a bit, but I guess there wasn't really anything I could do about that.

Along the way, I also found Alice's mother and punished her. Quite a lot.

There were definitely some things I had wanted to say to Alice's mother.

Of course, I also brought Alice to a place where there were people who could take care of her. A proper, nice-looking place that, unlike Jaunt, seemed quite trustworthy. This might mean I wouldn't meet Alice in the future, but... wait, no. I could just go see her myself, right? It was also quite strange seeing Alice giving me that really nasty glare, but even so I was satisfied. Now Jaunt would never be created.

I returned to Japan, and retired from my life as Magical Maruchipuru Mana-chan.

I met Yukari, became her friend (yes, in this world, I became Yukari's childhood friend just like Nanami!), went to the same elementary school as her, entered the same junior high, and even though we had already met, we once again ended up kissing in the hallway.

And then of course some bad things happened, and my left hand became a cell phone (I didn't really try to avoid the incident at all, so of course it happened. By the way, Nanami's accident also happened... but I intervened and so Nanami never stopped being friends with Yukari).

And then I became a third year student in junior high.

And Jaunt never showed up.



But then, despite all that, Yukari was kidnapped.

Not by Jaunt, but by a different organization.



An organization based in a completely different place and with completely different founding members.

... And I found myself completely back to square one.

I lived on for a while longer, finding out information about this newly created organization, before returning to the past.

And this time, I not only destroyed Jaunt, but also that new organization.



And then, a completely different third organization appeared and kidnapped Yukari.

I found myself starting from the beginning again...



There's no such thing as fate. There's no such thing as fate.



I didn't die. I couldn't. That's what I was. Even if I "died," then another me would just pick up in my place. And I could never ever abandon my goal.

There were other things I hadn't tried yet.

The world was... the possibilities were endless, so there were plenty of other things to try.

Again. Again. Again. Again. No matter how many times.

Trial and error.

"You know, I was thinking about what that me was saying that one time..."

Trial and error.



“... Ahh. The one that was talking about fate? She said that because we come from a future when Yukari had already died, there’s some paradox that prevents us from saving Yukari, right? That no matter what we tried, the end result would be the same, right?”

Trial and error.

“You know, if I think about what she said harder, I have to say she has a point. There might be some worth in thinking in that direction.”

Trial and error.

“... Yeah, you’re right. It’s not like we have anything else to do, and it doesn’t hurt to try. But how exactly do you propose we do this?”

Trial and error.

Trial and error.

“Dunno. All we have to do is decide to do it, and then we’ll just move forwards like light. Right?”

Trial and error.

Trial and error.

Trial and error...

“Yes, exactly.”

“If saving Yukari is impossible for *me*, then I just have to become *not me*.”



I easily managed to become someone who was not me.

If you want the theory behind this, I can always make one up for you. If you want to know how this actually worked, I can think of something for you. But at any rate, first I became my mother. My mother isn't precisely *me*, but she shares half of my genes, so in a sense she was half *me*. And I knew I could become *me*... and just believing that was enough. I just needed to think flexibly, and then it would be possible for the infinite me's in the infinite possibilities of these infinite parallel worlds. These me's could do anything. Anything but save Yukari, that is.

So I stopped being *me*, and became my mother.

I also tried becoming my father.

If I could become someone else once, then it was quite simple the second time around. I next became my grandfather. And then my grandmother. And then my great grandfather. And then my great grandmother. I continued tracing my lineage back to its roots, but then I tried reversing directions. I became my teacher at school. That teacher had been a distant relative in the far past. An ancestor from very, very, very far back also was connected to Nanami. So I became Nanami. Yes, the farther back I climbed, the more people I could become. My sense of time began to get screwy; it felt like my brain wasn't completely there. This seemed to be the price I paid for becoming other people.



Of course... there might've been a number of other things that I lost through this process, but I had no consciousness of them so I couldn't say what they were.

It wasn't like there weren't any problems when I did this (you've probably already realized it, but I was far from all-powerful).

Unfortunately, when I became my father, or my mother, or Nanami or someone else, it wasn't like I was becoming *me*, but rather half of half of half of an even smaller, even more dilute half of me. Maybe that was why my usual sharing of knowledge and experiences with my other selves didn't work well in this scenario. How should I put it... it was like I could only share memories of objective, external truths - I could tell where my father or mother or Nanami went and what they were doing - but I had no idea what they were thinking or their internal psychological states at those times.

I also had no idea why, but there were just some people I couldn't become even if by all logic I should've been able to become them... but I didn't really worry about this too much.

There was no point in sweating the small stuff.

The important thing here wasn't that I could completely become Nanami, or I could become anyone else in the world, but that I could reject *me*, and could become an existence that *wasn't myself*.

To test this out, I became Nanami and tried to protect Yukari.

But Yukari was still killed.

Well then... I suppose it's time for trial and error again.



Even if I became my teacher, even if I became my parents, even if I became a complete stranger, I couldn't save Yukari. I became the Prime Minister, and then a police officer, and then even the drill-wielding Kasoku, but I couldn't save her. No matter who I became, it all turned out the same. It was almost strange how impossible it was to save Yukari... it reminded me of that nursery rhyme from Mother Goose. Do you know it? Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the king's horses and all the king's men, Couldn't



put Humpty together again.

No matter who else I became, I couldn't save Yukari.

Right now, I had become Nanami, and I was looking at Hatou Manabu through Nanami's eyes.

It wasn't a me on the other end of a phone call, but a real, living and breathing Hatou Manabu.

A genuine "me" born to my parents, but still a different me.

It was quite interesting (although maybe this should've been obvious to me), but even though I had become someone else, Hatou Manabu still existed as normal.

And I couldn't share the knowledge of this Hatou Manabu.

This Hatou Manabu and I were completely separate existences.

Right now, in front of the me who had become Nanami, this Hatou Manabu and Yukari were talking happily together.

But Hatou Manabu didn't know.

Didn't know that nobody could put Humpty Dumpty together again.

I suddenly had a flash of an idea, and killed Hatou Manabu in one world. Nothing really changed. In another world, I threatened Hatou Manabu and forced her to stop being Yukari's friend. As expected, nothing really changed. It seemed that the existence or nonexistence of Hatou Manabu did not affect things too much.

One time, I tried being Yukari's mother.

In short, I realized that Yukari was being targeted because people knew about her purple eyes. So I just had to be in control and make sure the world never knew about those eyes - at the time, I thought this was a brilliant idea. I placed Yukari in constant supervision, never conceived her siblings, never even paid much attention to my husband, focusing all my attention on Yukari instead.



I was very strict with her to make sure she never slipped up and revealed the secret of her eyes, and trained her to behave properly so that nobody would ever suspect anything.

... Yeah, I guess to an outside observer, my methods might have seemed too harsh.

But this was Yukari’s very life that was on the line.

So I became a monster, hiding Yukari away so that nobody would ever know that she saw other living beings as robots. I didn’t let her cry, didn’t let her complain, and didn’t let her get away with even the tiniest mistake, making her vow each time to me that she would never make the same mistake again. On the other hand, I also showered her with affection to make sure she didn’t misunderstand my true feelings. I scolded her sharply to make sure she didn’t forget what I taught her, and etched my lessons forcefully into her head, but after all that I would embrace her. When she did well, I would praise her profusely, and I would constantly try with all my being to make it clear to her that I was doing this not because I hated her, but precisely because I loved her and wanted to protect her.

Yes, I was different from Alice’s mother.

I wasn’t doing this due to some desire for attention, but purely because I wanted to protect Yukari.

My training was so effective that even her father never realized the truth behind her eyes.

But the price for all this was that Yukari never became friends with Nanami, let alone Hatou Manabu. In fact, she never made a single friend at all. But I believed this price was well worth paying.

It was more important for me to keep Yukari safe.

And in order to do that, I would make sure nobody else ever learned of her sight.

She didn’t need any friends who might end up exposing her to danger, at least not right now. No, if she could just make it past her third year of junior high...



But in the end, Yukari never made it to her third year of junior high.

In fact, she never even made it to junior high at all.

On her first day of school, Yukari was hit by a car and died from her injuries.

According to witness statements, Yukari had been seen wandering around, unsteady on her feet, and it almost seemed like she had walked deliberately into the middle of the road...



Please, somebody tell me.

Where exactly was I going wrong?



As I became *others* and continued to cross over infinite worlds, I eventually felt like I finally understood things.

Understood where I was going wrong.

... In the end, could it be possible that neither Jaunt nor myself had anything to do with Yukari's death?

Maybe it was this world itself that was against Yukari... against me.

If you want to call that fate, then I won't stop you.

But for now, could it be that there was *something* about this world that was prejudiced against Yukari, prejudiced against her different way of seeing things, and was just hoping for her death?

Yes, my fundamental mistake was thinking that I was the only one who could *determine* reality with certainty.

But if I just thought about it with a cool head, I should've realized that if I could do this, then there should be other people who could do it as well.

At least in the beginning, I had been a normal person. A commoner.



If we explain things using the Copenhagen interpretation, then no matter how much I wanted to *determine* with certainty a world in which Yukari was still alive, the fact was that I was not the only person who was *observing* this world. All the people living in this world were also observing it.

Hypothetically, if the world were *fixed* by a majority vote of the sum total of those observations, then even if there were infinite possibilities, I was but one vote in the crowd, and maybe a being like Yukari who saw people as robots was just such an abnormality to normal humans that they all wanted to eliminate her. Just like the certain kind of geniuses that Alice had mentioned before.

If the sum total of all observations in the world recognized Yukari as an abnormality, then maybe her elimination had been determined with certainty?

Was that why nothing I did seemed to work?

Yes, no matter how many times I opened the box with the cat inside, as long as I myself was still in that box, then I could only be lured into believing that the cat was alive or dead. Once the entity that locked me in that box opened that box and observed what was inside, then the result I had thought was determined would just change on me. No matter what I tried, this other entity would re-determine the results, and maybe that's why I was trapped in this situation right now...



What I needed right now was knowledge.

And a good vantage point.

I needed to know what I should observe.

And what had already been observed.

... I would never accept that this was fate.

If there was another box that I was trapped in, then I would escape from that box.

Yes.



I finally began to understand my problem.

And thus, all that was left was to become like light and arrive at the answer.

I would definitely... definitely win this fight.



If the cat in the box were both alive and dead while the box stayed closed, then did the cat sense its own situation at all? Was it conscious that it itself was in a state of both life and death?

No, that was probably not the case.

The cat definitely wasn't thinking about whether it was alive or dead or in some superposition of the two, and we also didn't think that way.

We all could only feel like our bodies were fixed entities.

Our minds were incapable of recognizing any other state of being.

Even if someone were to tell us that we were quantum beings, that we were both waves and particles, that we were composed of probability densities, it would be impossible for us to just readily accept that statement. But when they continue to push and tell us that our bodies seemed to be fixed quantities only because we perceive them to be, it's not like we could easily dispute that either. It was impossible to deny a claim that we thought a certain way only because we perceived that way to be true. After all, humans were creatures that took in and processed information purely through perception.

If someone told me that I was sleeping and just having an extremely realistic dream right now, that my brain was floating in a water tank somewhere and I was just experiencing a virtual reality created by artificial electrical stimuli being sent to my brain, then there was no



place that discussion could proceed from there.

And thus, we arrive at the statement which will become our ultimate lifeline: "I think, therefore I am."

Have you ever heard of the cosmological theory known as the Anthropic Principle?

To put it simply, it is the idea that the cosmos exists purely so humans can live in it. That notion might seem rather outrageous by any normal standards, but there are many scientists who think about it in great seriousness. Namely, it seemed that the parameters and fundamental constants that defined our universe were incredibly convenient for human life. It was to the point where if those parameters changed just a tiny bit, then humans would not exist at all.

So to the universe, was the onset of humankind an inevitability? Or conversely, did the universe take this particular form just so humankind could come into being? These concepts formed the central pillar of the Anthropic Principle.

The amazing thing about this field of study was that the more research you did into this topic, the more you started believing that this principle had to be true.

I don't claim to be a physicist, so take what I say with a grain of salt, but there are quantum physicists who make some quite fantastical claims.

They say that the laws of the universe are what they are purely because humans observe them to be so.

They say that the universe is determined to be one which is convenient for humans purely because humans observe it to be so.

In other words, one and one make two not because that was how the universe always worked, but because humans, as the observers, felt it would be convenient for that to be true, and as a result the universe made it so. Observations in the future end up exerting their influence into the past, and the results of those observations are what form our present.



Honestly (and once again I'm not a physicist, so take what I say with a grain of salt), it was a rather outlandish way of thinking if you ask me.

Maybe this was arrogant of me to say. Maybe I was distorting the intended interpretation of the Anthropic Principle.

Either way, things certainly were very convenient. So I would put aside my personal feelings on the matter and rejoice, reveling in the correctness of this way of thinking. I would join the chorus of voices in their merrymaking. All hail the Anthropic Principle!

"I think, therefore I am."

At our core, we lived under the auspices of convenience.



I once again went back to being Hatou Manabu, and just left the world to proceed as it wished.

I went to junior high and met Yukari with that kiss of ours in the hallway. I also met Nanami, and eventually got wrapped up in that incident, after which my hand became a cell phone.

On the first day of the second school semester in our second year, Alice transferred into our class.

Yukari transferred out, and died.



After I graduated from junior high (by the way, I dated Kasoku Tomonori around then. Before Nanami got to him. Hmm... yeah, that might've been a pretty mean thing to do, but sue me for being a bit human sometimes), I joined Jaunt.

I investigated the truth behind Yukari's death, and along the way repaired my relationship with Alice, forging an even deeper relationship between the two of us.

Yes... I didn't just make Alice into my collaborator, but made her



depend on me.

I brainwashed her, made her love me, and set it up so that she would consider me her everything. I knew everything there was to know about Alice after all, so this was a simple task, and even if I failed I had infinite possibilities to help me. After I managed to ensnare Alice, I acted like an obedient member of Jaunt and polished my own powers in the meantime.

I waited for the right opportunity before exposing the depraved organization that Jaunt had become, and like lancing a boil I purified it and emerged at its head.

I had become the leader of Jaunt.

I changed Jaunt into an honest, upright organization, and assertively worked to protect and nurture the geniuses around the world. At the same time, I sought to expand my own influence - and for that I needed an expansive treasury. No matter how much money I had, it never seemed enough. I created a company and it succeeded. There were quite a few worlds in the infinite parallel worlds where I became very rich. I set up a foundation and continued to search far and wide for talent, gathering scientists and supporting promising enterprises. I prioritized development over profit, and invested all my personal wealth in pursuit of that goal.

Jaunt became a symbol of the dynamic progress that would shape the future, became synonymous with innovation, and at this point, I was Jaunt.

I spared no expense when it came to scientific advancement and realizing paradigm shifts in the ways we thought about things.

I personally traversed the world in search for people with talent. I never did anything dirty or sleazy - I didn't need to. After all, I was constantly followed by a thousand chances and ten thousand points of good fortune. I came to be known as the Goddess of Victory, and was cited as one of the chief architects of the Twenty-First Century.



I was selected by working women as one of the hundred most important people in the world, made my way onto the cover of Time Magazine, and constantly received requests from all corners of the world to give speeches and lectures.

All the while, the young people like Alice I had gathered into Jaunt continued their research.

I sent support to geniuses in physics, in biology, and in every conceivable field of study.

Sociology, fine arts, music, literature... I spared no effort to support any and every development that seemed like it would be useful towards my goal.

But, in the end, the key to everything was Alice.

So I would do anything for Alice.

... Anything except allow her to leave.

Human relationships were a tricky business, but I would always succeed.

"Alice. Is there anything I can do for you?"

At this point in time, I could speak four different languages, but despite that I always spoke Japanese with Alice.

Alice had grown into an adult and her hair was back to its original black color. She answered me without emotion.

"... Leave me alone. Just ignore me no matter what I say. Do not answer me."

I laughed and shook my head before answering her firmly.

"That would be impossible. I can love you from the bottom of my heart. And I can hate you from the bottom of my heart. But I can't do anything in the middle. Like light, out of all the paths possible from A to B, I can choose none but the most extreme, most simple path. Indeed, I can only live in the extremes."



Alice was pointing a gun at me, so I smiled and tried to make it a bit easier for her by averting my gaze and pointing to my forehead.

This was not the first time this had happened. Trial and error. Rinse and repeat.

"Try to finish it in one shot, please. Get closer if you wish."

"..... Do you really think I won't shoot you?"

"No? You probably won't understand what I'm saying, but I know all too well. I know that you can shoot me. And I know that for a fact. You might not be aware, but this isn't the first time you've killed me. And of course... the reverse of that has also happened."

"... Yes, Manabu, I confess I have no idea what you're saying."

"It's fine. But try to understand just this. Right now, the me in this world loves you. So if you wish it, I don't mind... I will leave this world to you. Be happy for that."

"... That's not at all what I really want!"

"Yes. I know that too."

And finally.

I could hear her sobbing.

I raised my head, and saw Alice's tears dropping to the floor in large drops.

... Yes, in every world, Alice always hesitated. She was really a kind girl.

I quietly let out a sigh.

"... Alice. You know, there really isn't anything else I can give you. So please... just shoot. It seems this world was a failure. So at least end it by your hand."

"... I-I..."



"If you love me... then prove it. Prove it with those hands of yours, Alice. Make me yours. Unless you do that, you will never be free from me."

Love. Hate. Always the most extreme, most simple path. I would carve that crest into my very being.

For that was what I was.

"Let me die for you, and bring an end to this world, Alice."

I searched through my memory, trying to find where I went wrong, trying to collect my thoughts.

But unfortunately, there was not much I could do.

Things will go better in the next world.

Bang!



Alice finally completed *it* in the year when I welcomed my forth-seventh birthday - it was the same year I was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for my long, continuing efforts in helping the world.

Alice's pride as a genius was on full display as she barged into my room in the early morning, hugging me and planting a loud kiss on my cheek before uttering three words.

"I did it."

I held my breath and just gazed at the large canvas that had been brought in front of me.

At the abstract-looking painting in front of me...

"... This is a painting of the Theory of Everything."



This was the one thing I had been chasing after, the one thing I had wandered across infinite worlds and recruited so many geniuses to find.

It was the pinnacle point of physics. The one theory that unified the four forces that created the universe: the strong force, the weak force, the electromagnetic force, and the gravitational force.

Of course, the completion of this theory did not automatically solve everything.

Just because we had the Theory of Everything didn't mean that tomorrow we would suddenly be able to predict the future, suddenly find the secret to immortality, or suddenly be capable of traveling between galaxies.

However, it would serve as confirmation.

It would serve as an indicator for whether all the science humanity had explored up until this point was useful, for whether our hypotheses about the birth of the universe or quantum mechanics, which up until now had been limited by the bounds of human observation, were actually correct.

Yes, this was the vantage point I needed for firm observations.

The indicator by which we could base everything.

"Well, I guess I still have to translate this into mathematics though. But now that I've come this far, the rest should be... Manabu, I'm sure I should be able to make it before your Nobel ceremony. So look forward to it-

I shook my head, interrupting Alice's words.

"No, Alice, this is more than enough. I understand... I truly do. I understand that this is what I've been hoping for all this time."

Yes, *I understood*.

I couldn't read mathematical formulae as paintings, and I didn't have much mathematical ability in the first place, but I could still for some reason understand what was in the painting in front of me.



I could just feel it.

Feel that I now knew what I should've known.

"... Manabu?"

"Yes. This is where the story begins."

Numbers dimly glowed through my left hand.

I had not used this cell phone of mine for a long time, but now its display was shining even though Alice was in the same room.

Seeing that, I sensed what was happening.

Ahh, just now, *my world* had been *observed*.

And now the universe would contract. Its wave function would collapse.

I finally, finally understood the thing I had been completely oblivious to this entire time.

Up until now, the universe had not yet been determined.

Up until now, the universe's wave function had never collapsed (or the many worlds had never lost their ability to interact with each other). Just like the box that held the box which contained the cat... and the box that further covered that one... and the box which further enclosed that one... we were merely unaware of it because we were entangled in this strand, but the world had never left the state of being a probability density. We were just not aware of it, but everything had existed in the probabilistic realm.

After all, human beings never knew what they should be observing.

However, just now, I came to know.

Know exactly what we should observe.

Using the Theory of Everything as an indicator.



Right now, starting from here, the past would be determined, and a future could be made.

The *beginning* had never evolved beyond a probabilistic existence, but it could now finally be collapsed into something real. All of time would rotate into imaginary time, and I would at last tunnel through that time to emerge away from it all, causing the universe to contract to a single point, before becoming infinite points, and then all these points would suddenly and violently expand outwards...

Of course, this was not the *ultimate answer*.

Someday, a theory would be formulated that would be even more unified than the Theory of Everything. Perhaps the next theory would even be able to solve the hard problem of consciousness. And when that theory came into being, once again the cosmos would contract anew. Once again the blast of the Big Bang would occur anew. And that wouldn't be the end of it. Again, and again, and again, and again... the trial and error would never cease. It was trial and error, ad nauseum, ad infinitum. It was the Uroboros, the serpent eating its own tail.

But what I had right now was plenty.

"Huh? What's that? That light on your left hand... Manabu?"

I softly put my left hand up to my ear, while I used my right hand to stroke Alice's cheek.

Like that, I pulled Alice to me, kissing her on the eyelids covering her honey-colored irises.

I whispered.

Thank you, Alice. Truly, thank you.

*Let's meet again after this universe goes round one cycle and is **determined** into its rightful, original state of being.*

... Although by then, I suppose I will be nowhere to found anymore in the cosmos.

"... Manabu?"



“Goodbye.”



And right then, I finally reached my goal.

My goal to extinguish the entity that was me.

Yes, at last, I had disappeared and was no longer part of this world.



Let's talk a bit about the girl named Marii Yukari.

She was currently a second year in junior high.

She seemed like a normal girl at first glance, but she apparently saw humans... no, she apparently saw all other living beings as robots through those purple eyes of hers (and although I say her eyes were purple, it's not like her eyeballs were physically any different from those of a normal human).

Because of that, she had been a lonely child. She yearned for friends, and any friends she did make were very precious to her.

Yes, even though Marii was not normal, she still had friends.

First, there was Tenjou Nanami, the girl who taught her how to smile.

Right now they were a bit estranged, I think? But even so, Marii still considered Tenjou to be her friend.

Her second friend was Hatou Manabu.

Hatou Manabu was quite a rare find; not only did she accept the secret behind Marii's eyes, but even took it in stride when Marii was forced to "fix" her.

Because of Hatou Manabu, Marii finally began to find some courage. She began to openly seek friendship with others, without any of the hesitation she had harbored before.

Marii's third friend was Alice Foyle.

She was a genius girl who also had a rather unique way of seeing things, but in a different way than Marii.

She called Marii her companion, claiming that she and Marii were birds of a feather. Of course, that didn't mean that Alice had the same eyes that Marii had, but even so Marii was quite happy at her words.

And then, Marii decided to transfer away from her school.

It was painful for Marii to separate from Hatou and Tenjou, but those were precisely the two that told her this decision would be for the best.

Of course, that hadn't been all. Marii herself was a bit torn about staying. She knew that if she stayed behind, there was a chance she would cause trouble to befall Tenjou and Hatou. They might get involved in something bad again because of her eyes. So maybe it was just too dangerous for them to be by her side...

At least, right now it was too dangerous.

I need the strength to survive on my own, she thought.

Hatou told Marii that she would wait for her. So Marii made her decision. She mustered up her courage. If she wanted friends, then she would have to reach out and grab them with her own hands. She would become stronger.

So, Marii placed her faith in Alice Foyle, placed her faith in Alice's comrades, and travelled to America to meet with Jaunt.

Alice and her friends were kind. Marii thought they could become good friends.

But the adults were different.



The adults had been aiming for Marii's eyes from the very start.

The adults had been planning to use Marii's eyes from the very start. They had tricked Alice and dispatched her to Japan in order to lure Marii over.

The adults spoke to Marii. *We would like to use those purple eyes of yours for the good of the world*, they said. *We would like for you to look at the whole earth with those eyes*, they said. *And if possible... just like with Tenjou Nanami and Hatou Manabu, we would like you to remodel the world*, they said.

Marii refused.

The world was fine just as it was, so how could she do such a cruel thing to it?

The adults tried to convince Marii. *The world is a living creature on the brink of death*, they said (Marii rejected that argument). *For the sake of the world, humans had to sometimes directly manage it and mechanically modify it*, they said (Marii also rejected that argument). Marii was so stubborn that the adults isolated her in a separate building in their research facility. She was separated from Alice and the others and punished with solitude. She was also threatened with torture (but for some reason they never followed through on that. They were definitely serious people, but... I wonder why...)

They threatened to kill her family, and Marii retreated into herself.

She herself became like a robot, not giving any kind of response no matter how the people at Jaunt talked to her. Eventually, she stopped even taking meals, and the adults finally resigned themselves and changed their plans.

If Marii wouldn't cooperate with them, then they would figure out the secret behind her eyes for themselves.

To be honest, even the adults at Jaunt were not putting too much hope in being able to get much out of Marii's cooperation. They didn't have any doubt that Marii was telling the truth about her way of seeing things, but they didn't have a good measure of exactly how much she could do with her eyes... after all, unlike Tenjou and Hatou, they had never witnessed her abilities for themselves (and honestly,



at this point they hadn't really looked too carefully into the incidents involving Tenjou and Hatou either). So rather than an interest in the unknown possibilities hidden behind Marii's eyes, they were more interested in the biochemical properties of her eyes and how those properties related to the qualia debate.

The children probably had no way of knowing this, but Jaunt was also voraciously running through its funding, and because of its support grants from various nations and its budgetary concerns (and other adult matters), rather than investigating something invisible and unknown, it would rather investigate something concrete and quick that could bear the fruit it needed as leverage in further negotiations with its funding agencies.

There wasn't anything particularly strange about Marii's eyes themselves.

So the secret to Marii's powers must be in that most mysterious of human organs: the human brain.

If they investigated Marii's brain, then they might be able to find some clues about the concept known as "qualia," which was an concept that was heretofore so elusive that it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say we didn't understand anything at all about it. At this point, Marii was essentially an invalid and was not being useful at all. Rather, she was the primary bottleneck to their progress right now. Because of that... Jaunt decided to offer Marii up as fodder for inhumane experiments. And on that day...

The FBI raided the complex and arrested the adults at Jaunt.

One of the Jaunt employees had leaked their plans to the authorities.

(Well, to be precise, one of the Jaunt employees had told Alice and the other children about Marii's condition, and they were the ones who went to the police... but for various reasons none of this was kept on record. The Jaunt employee's identity was also still a mystery.)

Like that, Yukari was rescued.

Right now, she was lying in a hospital bed, an IV drip hooked to her arm.



She was in quite serious condition due to malnutrition.

There was no longer any danger to her life, but she had yet to speak a single word to anybody since her rescue.

But there was no need to worry. Even now, Marii's friends and family were on the way from Japan.

Of course Hatou Manabu was coming, but even Tenjou Nanami had begrudgingly decided to come.

Alice and the others, who had been worried about Marii all this time, were also sleeping in the next room. They had refused to leave her alone and had been in the hospital with her this entire time.

She had her family and her friends. She had people who really cared for her.

So, she would be okay. Marii would be able to get back on her feet.

There would probably still be danger in the future. There would probably still be pain to deal with.

But she would be able to overcome all of that. She would definitely be able to find happiness.

From here on out, Marii Yukari would be able to live a happy life.

Come now, it's about time to wake up...

Marii's eyes opened.

She looked around the room, and then suddenly her eyes landed on the robot model placed near her pillow.

It was a so-called "plastic model" that Alice and the others had brought when they visited her in her hospital room. Alice knew how much Marii loved this model. Marii stared closely at the little robot...

"..... Gaku... chan?"



It seemed that Marii was still a bit sleepy.

Or maybe the vestiges of the dream she was having was still lingering on her eyelids.

She rubbed her eyes, lifted her head up, and finally seemed to be fully awake as she took another hard look at the robot in her hands...

“... Gaku-chan? Gaku-chan, right?”

I felt my heart stop in surprise.

Although, I suppose technically I didn't have a heart anymore.

No, you're wrong. I rejected her statement.

Right... Marii Yukari often relied on Hatou Manabu.

In fact, Hatou Manabu had played a large part in her moving overseas.

Right now, she probably was still just psychologically unstable, and was looking around for Hatou Manabu. That was all.

I'm sure she couldn't see *me*.

After all... I no longer existed.

Right now, I was an entity that could not be observed by anybody.

The Theory of Everything that Alice had found could also be used to determine when something had been observed with certainty.

But to put it another way, it was also a theory that could be used to derive the boundaries of human observation.

I understood that, and used it so that I would exceed those boundaries.



I went back ten or so billion years, back to the starting of our universe, and meddled with my own personal parameters so that I was remade as an entity to which the Theory of Everything could not be applied. I had begun evolving again from scratch. Into something without flesh that humans could not perceive... into something that was neither wave nor particle, nor even a probability density. I was an existence that did not exist, something that did not reside in the observable human universe. I had extinguished myself from that universe.

So that nobody could ever observe me.

And so there shouldn't be anybody in this world who could be aware of my existence.

In other words, there was nobody here who could *determine* me with certainty.

Which meant that nobody could interfere with my efforts to protect Marii Yukari.

I would no longer let anybody kill Marii...

"..... Gaku-chan? Why aren't you talking back? Are you mad at me? Is it because I never called you? That's... I'm sorry. But... there were a lot of things I had to deal with, and..."

I was no longer human, without blood running through my veins nor eyes to cry with, and yet seeing Marii near tears like that was just completely unbearable for me.

So, I timidly, *timidly* tried to talk (I was a bit surprised that I hadn't forgotten about the concept of "talking").

{{... Are you talking to me?}}

"Yes, you! Wah, it really is Gaku-chan! Ugh, don't scare me like that!"



{{N-No, you're wrong. I'm not Hatou Manabu. Hatou Manabu is on an airplane headed here right now, and I'm... I'm just a hallucination. Your brain is probably just a bit confused right now, so you should go back to sleep and rest well.}}

“Wah! You're being mean! Don't be such a bully! Sure, I see people as robots and I don't really know about facial expressions too much... and sometimes I do confuse some people for other people... but I know Gaku-chan when I see her! Sure, you're in a really strange form right now... I guess that's why you're the most adaptable robot I know! But you're definitely Gaku-chan! My eyes don't lie to me!

But umm... how and when did you expand that functionality of yours by so much?”

For a while, I couldn't believe my ears.

Could it be that Yukari's purple eyes could see me?

Even though I should be unobservable by anybody who was subject to the Theory of Everything?

For something like ten billion years... it was all just a memory, but I had been alone.

Nobody could see me, and I couldn't talk to anybody. I just waited by myself for the day when I could meet Yukari again...

That's how I had lived up until now, and that was how I was expecting to live from now on.

But I was fine with that. That was what I was, after all.

I had done many things that I felt made me deserving of that fate. For the sake of reaching my goals, I had trampled worlds underfoot, destroyed possibilities. Yes, I had left everything to the infinite me's, crossing from world to world, running from possibility to possibility. All the while looking for the world that was the most convenient.



But in the end, there wasn't such a thing as a world that was unnecessary.

I was unmistakably a sinner who deserved to fall into the depths of Hell.

I had to atone for my sins.

So, I had been alone up until now, and even if I could protect Yukari for just a bit, I was okay with being alone for eternity.

That's... what I had decided, but...

"... What's wrong, Gaku-chan? What happened-"

Before I realized it, I had begun to cry.

I had built up and piled up so many feelings over these endless, long years, and it all came crumbling down in an instant.

And once that dam broke, it was already too late to stop the flood.

Just like a child throwing a temper tantrum, I began to sob, my nonexistent tears flowing down my nonexistent cheeks, and then I began to talk.

Began to talk about everything that had happened up until now.

Began to talk about how it was my fault that Yukari had moved away.

Began to talk about how because of that, Yukari had died, and how I had regretted that all this time.

Began to talk about the parallel worlds.

About the infinite possibilities.



About how I found Yukari's dead body, and then started to plan revenge against her murderers. About how I realized I could change the past and decided to try and protect Yukari. About how I changed the past. About how I repeated this over and over and over again, but no matter how I changed the past I could never protect her. I would change something, she would die... I would change something, she would die... I talked about how I killed Alice, killed Nanami, killed Hatou, killed other people for my own purposes, killed myself, became Nanami, became Yukari's mother, advancing like light all the while, and then used Alice and dried up all these many parallel worlds for my own selfish purposes, running away when the cards were not in my favor, and repeated this over and over and over and over and over and over again in infinitely many worlds...

I told her everything.

And Yukari just sat there, listening to me.

She didn't ask any questions, but just sat and listened to me earnestly. She didn't hurl any insults at me, but just sat there quietly...

And just listened to me confess everything.



"... So, you used that Theory of Everything thing and now you can change your body into all kinds of different things?"

{{... Uhh, I don't know if that's exactly what it is, but... I guess, sort of?}}

After I had finished telling my story, I felt quite refreshed. But on the other hand, I also felt my nonexistent heart starting to race.

... Yukari probably was completely taken aback by what I had done.

She was probably afraid... or no, it didn't really seem that way, but she probably hated me now. She probably was disgusted by me.

But, that was fine. I didn't mind.

It was already an unexpected blessing to be able to confess everything to her. Anything more than this would be an undeserved luxury.



After this, I would just continue to protect Yukari for as long as she lived. I would be satisfied with that.

There was nothing else I wanted.

{{Anyways... I guess you don't have to worry about anything anymore. Umm... I mean, if you'll allow me to be by your side. I'll definitely protect you. If I'm like this, then nobody can interfere with me, and I can just continue to observe and interact with things with no fear of any repercussions.}}

Yukari suddenly looked like she was in pain.

She dropped her gaze to the PlaMo robot she was holding in her hand before finally looking up again (by the way, it's not like I was now a PlaMo robot or anything. I didn't exist, after all. I was a cloud-like entity who was both everywhere and nowhere in this room simultaneously). Yukari began to talk.

"... Umm, Gaku-chan. Umm... can I say something? I don't really want to hurt you, but I think friends should be able to speak their minds to each other too. So... here I go, okay? Just be prepared and listen, okay? Umm... I'm really sorry you had to go through all that for me, and I really don't want to say this, but...

I really don't think that no matter what you do, you'll ever be able to protect me."

Yukari's words came out in a gentle stream.

And I gasped a bit (even though I didn't really have a throat to gasp with). I tried to argue back.

{{Eh? W-Why? That's not true at all! It'll be fine! There's nobody anymore who can observe me! So nobody can interfere with me anymore!}}

"But I can see you, right? Look, I can see you right there, Gaku-chan."

{{That's... but, I don't really mind if you can see me.}}





“Don’t you see? Gaku-chan, don’t you see where you went wrong? Where the problem is? I can observe you just fine, Gaku-chan. So you’ll never be able to change my fate.”

{{Eh...?}}

“The only one who can change my fate... the only one who should change it... is me and me alone. Gaku-chan doesn’t have that right.”

I technically didn’t have any eyes right now.

But even so, I felt my vision cloud over.

I felt spider web cracks form inside of me, and then something shattered.



“I don’t really know too much about quantum physics and that kind of stuff... but if my destiny is to die, then that’s my own destiny to observe. It belongs to me, just like Gaku-chan’s destiny belongs to her... that’s how I think things work.”

The only things that people could observe and determine were their own fates.

It was nothing more than an abstract argument, without any support from scientific logic or anything like that, and yet I felt something just click in my head.

Ahh, I see.

I thought that if nobody could observe me, then nobody could interfere with me.

And I would be able to protect Yukari.

But perhaps Yukari was right about how she was the only one who could change her fate, and was the only one who could prevent her own death. Maybe there was nobody that had been interfering with me, and everything I had done up until this point was just me trying to force my will onto Yukari.

Yukari’s destiny belonged to nobody except for her.



Anybody else trying to change that fate would be guilty of a dreadfully sacrilegious form of hubris.

But that was precisely what I had been trying to do...

After all this time, I finally realized it.

That was where I had been going wrong.

All this time, I had been trying to force my own thoughts onto others.

I said that it was all for Yukari's sake, but I ignored how she felt and just used that reason as my excuse...

An excuse to run away from my own fate which I should've been facing.

From the reality that I couldn't save Yukari.

From my own utter powerlessness...

{{Ahh... I really was an idiot.}}

I shouldn't have been so arrogant and self-righteous by trying to unilaterally protect Yukari. Rather, I should've told her my feelings from the onset.

I shouldn't have forced my desires onto her, but should've explained things properly to her.

I should've apologized for being weak and not being able to protect her. *Yes... I was just a commoner, and I didn't really have any extraordinary abilities, but if things continued like this then Yukari might die. But we should try hard to overcome this together,* I should've said.

No matter how cruel reality really was, that's what I should have done.

{{I'm sorry, Yukari. You're completely right. I was wrong from the very beginning.}}



“No, I’m sorry too! This is my fault too. It’s all because I went and fixed up your hand with a cell phone...”

{{No, that was fine. You didn’t do anything wrong. There wasn’t anything else you could’ve done, and there was no way we could’ve predicted that all this would happen... and in the end, I was the one who decided to become like this.

... Also, it’s not like this is all too bad.

Rather, with this kind of “body” I can help you out a lot more. So I’ll be fine...}}

Even though I had make a huge mistake.

Even though it was a mistake I could never take back. So... I would stay like this...

“What are you saying?!”

Yukari suddenly yelled out.

“Gaku-chan... I’m really grateful for what you did... but it’s painful. To think you have to stay in this form... to think I can’t ever hug you anymore...”

Yukari’s voice began to mix with tears, and I hurriedly tried to calm her down.

{{H-Hey, come on, don’t forget. There’s another Hatou Manabu in this world too, right? So-}}

“No! Gaku-chan is Gaku-chan, but Gaku-chan is Gaku-chan! ... Umm... anyways, even if there’s another Gaku-chan, for you to have to stay like this... for you to never be able to talk to anyone else... and for this to continue forever and ever, even after I’m gone... I don’t want that!

If you sinned, then I think you’ve been punished more than enough!

... Hey, Gaku-chan. I’m going to try hard. I’m going to try hard and face my own fate so that you don’t have to change forms like this. So please... just go back to being you, okay?”



I smiled (if that even made sense in my current form), and responded.

{{Thanks, Yukari. I'm really happy you feel that way.}}

"So then--"

{{But, that's impossible now. I... can't go back anymore. No, that's not it...}}

{{I don't know how to go back.}}

Yukari froze for a moment at my words.

"How to go back...? Umm... can't you just use that cell phone just like you did the first time...?"

I could hear the unease in her question, so I answered as calmly as possible.

{{The one who possessed the cell phone was Hatou Manabu. The one who had used that cell phone as a springboard to end up becoming *like that* was also Hatou Manabu. And... certainly, I might've been Hatou Manabu at one point. But, right now...}}

I remember that at one point in time, I was the existence that was known as Hatou Manabu.

But what exactly did being Hatou Manabu entail?

What kind of existence had she been?

I didn't know.

And I didn't know how I could go back to being Hatou Manabu.

... Before I realized, I had become something that was completely not myself...



{{I became my mother at one point. I became Tenjou Nanami. I became your mother too. Yes, I could become so many different people, and then my memories became so limitless, so infinite, so mixed up, so changed... and the thirteen billion three-hundred million years I've evolved was such a long time, that now...

I really have stopped knowing what it exactly means to be Hatou Manabu.}}

"Oh. Is that all? If that's all, everything will be fine!"

Yukari's completely nonchalant response jolted me from sinking deeper into my sea of memories.

Yukari laughed and continued.

"I see... I guess I never told you. Gaku-chan, you've really been misunderstanding something. Sorry."

{{Eh?}}

"Hmm... okay. So, let me just ask you something. You said you became a bunch of people, but did you ever become me? Or become Alice-chan?"

{{Eh? Umm... yeah, I guess I never could become you or Alice. But I thought that was just because Alice was a foreigner...}}

"No no, that's not it. I mean... Alice is one thing, but you could become my mom, right? And then you couldn't become me? I'm Japanese, and I'm my mom's daughter, so we're definitely genetically related. So you should've been able to become me... don't you think that's a bit strange?"

Yes... that was certainly strange.

When I had discovered I could become other people, of course I had tried to become Yukari as well.

If I wanted to protect Yukari, then I figured becoming Yukari would



be the best way (of course, if I had done that it would've been missing the point quite badly, but at that moment in time I just wanted to exhaust all my options).

However, even though I could become Yukari's mother, I never was able to become her biological daughter.

When I realized that at the time, I didn't really think anything of it and just continued on my way, but...

{{Yukari, do you know why I couldn't become you?}}

Yukari nodded, and gave me a slightly lonely smile.

"... This is just what I think, but... it's probably because you knew it inside. Knew that you would never be able to see what I see...

Knew that nobody else would ever be able to see what I see..."

{{... That's...}}

We were and forever would be parallel lines.

In the end, we would literally never be able to understand each other... and we were able to become friends purely because we acknowledged that. That acknowledgement was the grand foundation on which our relationship was built.

And yes, I knew all this and had accepted it...

"Just like with me, you also knew that you wouldn't be able to understand what the world looked like to a genius like Alice. So you couldn't become either of us... or no, *you couldn't impersonate either of us.*

Gaku-chan, you know that you never actually became Ten-chan or my mom, right?

You looked just like them, and you stood in the same positions as they did, but you just believed that you had become someone else. What really was happening, though, was that you were just a Gaku-chan who was acting like Ten-chan or mom.



So in reality... you never could understand what the world looked like to Ten-chan or my mom.

Nobody can ever, ever truly share what they see with anybody else.

If anybody could... then I think *you should've been able to become me.*"

I... had only believed that I had become someone else, but I had always just been Hatou Manabu...?

And that's precisely why I could never become Alice or Yukari, two people who I knew from the start I could never be like...?

... Certainly, that was a consistent explanation for why I could never become the two of them. But...

{{But so what? I mean, even if that's true, it still doesn't fix the fact that I can't remember what I was like.}}

I weakly got that out, but Yukari shook her head.

"No no no, you don't have to remember! You're trying too much to come up with this condition and that condition for going back. But in the end, you never could be anyone else. You've always been Gaku-chan! Just like how no matter what I try, I could never become anybody other than me... just like how the world will always look like this to me."

{{... Yukari.}}

"Don't you see? No matter what form you take, Gaku-chan is still Gaku-chan. Don't go and think so hard about remembering stuff that doesn't matter. Just feel it..."

Yukari stopped for a moment, thought, and then continued with a bit of red in her cheeks.

"Hey, Gaku-chan... do you remember how we met back in junior high? Back in that hallway?"

{{Of course. I was walking down the hall and you suddenly came running at me and ended up stealing my first kiss away from me.}}



“Wah, wah, but I didn’t know you were going to come back around the corner so suddenly! That was my first kiss too...”

After she said that, Yukari dropped her gaze to the plastic model robot in her hands with slightly flushed cheeks.

She fixed her gaze onto the robot and smiled.

“Hey, Gaku-chan...”

You know, I never needed a god who would be able to grant my wishes.

No, I just needed a friend who could wish with me together.”

“So let’s meet one more time?”

Yukari softly kissed the robot in her palm.

And I suddenly felt something in my head that shouldn’t have existed.

In my body that shouldn’t have existed, in my arms that shouldn’t have existed...

The feelings from back then came washing back over me.



I remembered.

Yes, we had met back then.

That had been the start of everything.

What had left the deepest impression on me had not been the feeling of Yukari’s lips, but the feeling of having her in my arms. I remember the warmth. I remember how soft she felt. My mind was in complete disarray, and yet perfectly calm at the same time. I remember my heart going pitter patter as I felt Yukari’s stiffened form with my entire body, wondering what she would do once she regained her senses. Pitter patter.



I felt a strange feeling envelope me, as if this was the start of something, as if we were the only two people in the middle of this vast, open world.

That was the tale of our first meeting.

It was a meeting just between the two of us. We had been alone in that place.

And miraculously, against astronomical odds, we had managed to find each other in this vast, open world.

No matter how many people there were in the world, no matter how many times they embraced each other, kissed each other...

That meeting and that kiss belonged to just the two of us.

We embraced and our eyes met each other.

And what I felt... that was a qualia of purple that belonged only to me.

A treasure that belonged only to Hatou Manabu.

And thus... Marii Yukari and Hatou Manabu met each other.



Ah, I see, I thought as I fell through the infinite darkness.

When I look at an apple, an infinite other me's would also be similarly looking at an apple.

Those infinite me's in infinite worlds look at the same apple and feel the same thing. Think the same thing. As all of us simultaneously fixate on that apple, one part of our brains resonate in harmony, mutually interfere, and all that brings an image of an apple into focus in our heads like some kind of hologram.

That was qualia.



I was an infinite number of thin films stacked together, and qualia was the one string that threaded and bound all these me's together.

No matter how many me's in how many worlds there were, qualia was the one piece of proof that all of those me's were none other than me.

It was a sensation that only I could understand, that I could never share with a friend no matter how close she was. It was the ultimate proof that I was me.

I didn't need to remember anything.

The things I felt were things that only I could feel.

I was not anybody else. I was just me, just the one and only Hatou Manabu.

And qualia was the final proof of that.

The world around me swelled with white light.



I leapt up from within the darkness.

Completely caught off guard by a sudden feeling of disorientation, I looked around and tried to figure out exactly where I was right now.

But before I could figure that out, I saw my left hand dimly glow.

And I was attacked by a sudden, unshakable feeling.

... Ugh, this was bad.

In the end, nothing had changed.

Controlled entirely by my panic, I put my left hand to my ear and dialed out, not even checking who I was calling. Tears leaked from my eyes as I begged the person on the other end.

“... Please... Yukari will die like this...”

I heard the person on the other end gasp.

But before she could respond to me, I ended the call.

My heart was racing at a feverish pace.



I needed someone to depend on. I wanted to ask the other me's for help. If this went on, someday Yukari would...

"... No. Don't run away, *me*."

Stop it. Was I just going to let everything repeat again?

I took a few quick, shallow breaths, and managed to calm myself down.

I stopped myself from shaking and looked around my room to get my bearings.

This was certainly my room.

The date showing on the digital calendar atop my desk matched the date when I had first received a phone call from myself.

Just to be sure, I turned on my television.

I saw my reflection dimly on the TV screen, and gave a forced smile at seeing a face I had not seen in a long time.

Ahh, so today was *that* night.

The night right before I told Yukari that she should transfer away from our school.

... So I guess in the end, this day had been the divergence point.

This was where I was supposed to retry things from.

No, wait. I wasn't retrying anything. After all, nothing had begun yet.

I couldn't hope to change Yukari's destiny; I didn't have the right qualifications to do that job.

The only person who could change Yukari's fate was Yukari herself.



If I could do anything here... it would be to support and help Yukari as her friend.

I wouldn't be able to do anything more than that... no matter how painful it might be.

I also had my own personal destiny that I had to face. And just like Yukari...

I wouldn't run away anymore.

Even if I needed to depend on someone else a bit, I wouldn't run.

I would move forwards.

... I took a long, deep breath, and then...

I struck my left hand against my window.

A loud snap echoed through my room as a radial fissure formed through the glass.

A spider web of cracks spiraled outwards from the place of impact, and the window shattered.

A violent heat rushed through my senses as I restrained myself from crying out, looking at my hand that was now covered in red.

I could feel my heartbeat through my bloodied left hand, almost as if it had become a second heart... and no matter what I tried, that hand never lit up.

And that was fine.

I heard my mother shouting outside my door.

"Manabu?! What was that sound?!"

I tried to yell right back, but it was almost as if I hadn't used my voice in many, many years. I could only manage a dry, hoarse response.



“... S-Sorry. I tripped and broke my window.”

“What? What are you doing in there? Are you hurt anywhere? Is everything alright?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

Although, that really was a lot of blood...

Maybe I should go to the hospital.

Or maybe go over to Yukari’s place?

Either way, I had to have Yukari do something about this cell phone. She had to make it so I could never use it so easily again.

This power was just too great a responsibility.

I felt dizzy and plopped myself down on my bed.

I put a hand to my head. Before I knew it, I could feel my memories slipping away one after the other.

Of course they would. It’s not like a single person could maintain the memories from an infinite number of worlds.

Up until now, I was able to use my cell phone to keep all those memories, using the infinite minds of those infinite me’s. But now that that cell phone had ceased to function - now that I had deliberately broken it - my ability to quantumly interfere with the universe had reverted back to that of *a normal human*. So, of course, any memories that couldn’t be managed by my single human brain would disappear. Hmm... maybe it would be better to say that the surplus parts of me had been cut away? I admit I felt a bit lonely - there were some fond memories mixed in there after all - but maybe if I fixed this cell phone I would be able to connect to all those memories again? No, wait wait wait...

“Manabu? Are you listening to me?”

I felt exhausted, as if I had just come back from a long, long journey.



And... I felt a bit cold.

Maybe I should sleep...?

That sounded like a good idea. Yeah, I'll sleep. And then I'll pretend everything had been a dream.

When I woke up, I'd be myself again, good as new.

So I'll just close my eyes...

"Hey, Manabu? I'm opening the door... hyah?! Manabu? Manabu!!"

"Shut up, mom... do you know what time it is? I just want to sleep..."

"Idiot! Dear! Call an ambulance! An ambulance-"

I did end up getting taken to the hospital in an ambulance.

I was still in my girl's pajamas. And yes, that was a bit embarrassing.

Ahh... wouldn't it be nice if all of this had just been a dream...



And so, allow me to draw our story to a close in exactly the way I had promised I would.

Everything had just been a long, long dream.

But, I had to wake up now.

If I had to make a fairy tale metaphor, I would say that the princess (even though that was completely out of character for me) had finally received her prince's kiss.

Dozing off had felt quite nice indeed, but I couldn't just stay sleeping forever.



Even though I spent a somewhat embarrassing night in my girl's pajamas at the hospital, I still ended up going to school the next morning.

I mean, it was nice that I got taken to the hospital and all, but my wounds were actually disproportionately shallow when compared to how much blood I had lost. Maybe it was because the wound was on my left hand, but it was almost strange... even so, the doctors insisted on wrapping a huge bandage around my hand (just for appearances, if I had to guess), and if you looked at me from afar you might be tempted to think I had suffered a serious injury.

As I approached our school that morning, I saw Yukari standing in front of the school gate. She seemed to notice me and rushed over with a worried look in her eyes.

I also caught a glimpse of Nanami standing in the gate's shadow.

Had they been waiting for me because they were worried for me? Honestly, this wound really wasn't a big deal... ugh, now I feel kinda bad... and at the same time, grateful that I had friends like these.

I watched Yukari running over to me, but before I could call out to her, I heard a voice from behind me.

"... My my, you certainly look healthy this morning, commoner. I suppose you should be thankful your blood tends to rush to your head and not to your hands. "



I let out a sigh and turned around.

“Good morning, Alice. Thanks for all these kind words so early in the morning.”

“Wah, wah, good morning Gaku-chan, Alice-chan. Umm... Gaku-chan, your left hand...”

“Do you not understand sarcasm, commoner? Smashing your hand into a window like that... I suppose your eyes must be just as useless as that head of yours.”

“Well aren’t you in a bad mood this morning, Alice. Were you worried? I mean, if you want to pick a fight with me I’ll take you on. After all, you’re mostly the reason I couldn’t sleep and ended up like this.”

“..... What is that supposed to mean?”

“I was thinking all this time. Thinking about what you told me about Yukari.”

Yukari froze.

Alice’s expression didn’t change, but that look in her eyes showed me that she was very interested now in what I had to say.

“... So, did you succeed in gathering your thoughts, then? If you are Yukari’s true friend, then you should know what you have to do for her sake.”

“... Yeah.”

I nodded, turned back around to face Yukari, and continued.

“... Yukari, I guess in the end, I don’t want you to transfer.”

“Eh?” “Ehh?”

Yukari and Alice both looked at me blankly.

Yes, it was true that I might not have any special abilities to protect Yukari.



I couldn't even protect her from this world of ours, let alone some evil organization.

But even so...

"Of course, I prioritize Yukari's opinion here. And let me just say that no matter what Yukari chooses, I'll always... always be her friend. That won't ever change.

... But I honestly don't want her to transfer away from our school.

... We're still kids, and someday... someday we might have to separate from each other as adults. But, that's why... if we have a choice right now, then I want Yukari to stay here. And if there's anything I can do to help make that happen, then I'll do it. I'll try my best. Those are my honest feelings."

Alice cut in before I could continue.

"... Okay? And what do you plan to do if some misfortune befalls her?"

I looked Alice in the eyes, not backing down.

"... I know that's a possibility. So I won't try to force Yukari to do anything. But... if possible, I want a chance. I know I'm being selfish, so even if I get mixed up in something because of Yukari, even if I fall into danger, I accept the risk. I'm ready to face that. And if the opposite happens, if Yukari gets mixed up with some dangerous stuff because of me... well.

Yukari, I want you to be prepared. Be prepared for the possibility of something like that happening. Just like I'll be prepared.

And most of all... I want you to do all that while staying with me... staying with us. We'll face those things together.

That's what I want you to decide.

Of course, if you don't want to shoulder that burden, then I won't force you to either..."

"..... Gaku-chan....."



Yukari was about to say something, but Alice stopped her and let out a frustrated sigh.

“Hatou. That is a rather unfair argument. You are trying to put Yukari’s feelings of friendship to the test. Do you really think a true friend should be doing something like that? Can you really argue that and still hold your chest out with pride and claim yourself to be Yukari’s true friend?”

“Yeah, I can. Got a problem?”

“This is why commoners are so... ugh! Yukari, please think about this logically. A friend is someone who should be considering what is best for you. If Manabu were your true friend, then she should be rejoicing and giving you her blessing for this opportunity to start your life anew. If she cannot do that, if she prioritizes her own selfish desires over your well-being, then she cannot be your real friend! She is just trying to use you, and she will eventually betray and reject you! There is just a long, impassable trench between us geniuses and these commoners, and someday, someday in the future, I am positive she will-”

Alice began a long-winded speech at Yukari, but before she could finish I smirked and interrupted her.

“Wanna try it out then?”

Alice stopped in her tracks and slowly twisted her neck to look at me. I could almost hear her muscles creaking.

“..... What? Try what out, precisely?”

“Ugh, are you not listening? Alice, why not try it out and consider me your friend?”

“..... What?”

“Yes, let’s become each other’s friend. Then you’ll be able to figure it out, right? Figure out if I’m lying to you or not. Figure out if I can be a real friend or not. Does that not make sense?”

Alice completely froze, and I continued with a note of challenge in my voice.



"Or maybe you're just scared? I'm totally fine on my side though."

"W-W-W-What are you saying?! Do not push your luck, commoner! As if I would ever be afraid!"

"Really? Okay, then you'll be my friend? Yay!"

"No... that's... well, I suppose you are in fact only a semi-commoner, but... no! I will never trust a commoner! I can never trust-"

"Oh come on, your ears must not be working. I'm telling you to just try it out, right? Science is fundamentally driven by trial and error, isn't it? Also, are you that worried that I'm going to betray you or something? I guess you really *are* scared of me?"

"I would never be afraid of the likes of you! Do not pretend as if you have the power to have any effect on me!"

"Well then, there's no problem."

I reached out my hand, and then Yukari joined in.

"Yes, Alice-chan! I'm asking you too! If you can be my friend, then be Gaku-chan's friend too! Don't just decide it's impossible from the start! Please!

... If you really consider me your friend, then you have to accept my other precious friends as well..."

Alice squinted and grumbled for a bit, glaring at my outreached hand.

Finally, she let out a huge sigh and spoke.

"..... If Yukari is so eager for me to do this... if that is what she wants no matter what... then I understand. I will try... but be aware that I only do this to help Yukari save face."

Alice held her hand out and timidly grabbed the fingers on my outstretched hand.

Without a moment's delay, I reached out even further and grabbed her small hand. I shared a firm handshake with Alice.



“Great. Well then, we’re friends from now on!”

“D-D-Do not take this the wrong way! I am just here to peel back your skin to reveal the monster inside! And then I will open Yukari’s eyes to the truth...”

I suddenly looked around, and noticed that Nanami was nowhere to be found anymore.

I sighed and called out to Alice and Yukari.

“Well, let’s get to school then. Yukari, Alice.”

“Do not so lightly call me by my first name, commoner!”

“..... I’m pretty sure that’s what I’ve called you all this time though, little miss foreigner.”

Ahh... that’s how simple it was.

Yukari was on the other side of Alice gripping onto one of her hands, while I was on this side gripping onto the other one. Alice’s cheeks were tinged red but she showed no signs of trying to shake me off. Seeing that, I felt the muscles in my cheek loosen.

I see. If I was powerless by myself, then I just needed to seek help.

And if someone else seemed like they were crying out for help, then I just had to reach out to them.

We just had to meet anew and start over.

I might have taken quite a long detour on my way here, but when I tried looking, it took but a moment...

“By the way, do you two know about Fermat’s Principle? Tenjou told me about it, but...”

“Wah, wah? Fur-mah?”

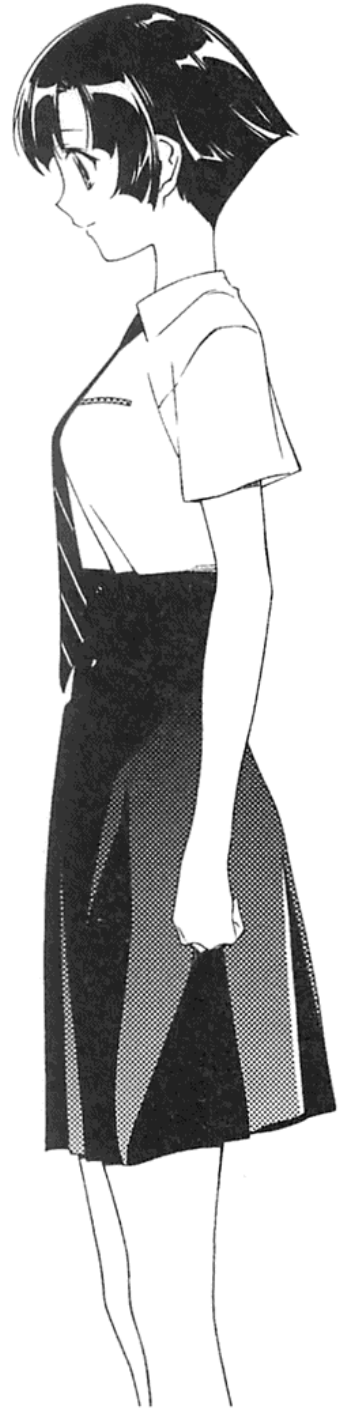


“Of course a genius like me would know about Fermat’s Principle.
To summarize, Fermat’s Principle states that-

To find that road along which light traveled.



If







Just when I started to think it was pretty warm, the rain began to fall. And just when I thought the cold, windy days would continue, it became warm again. This weather pattern was known in Japanese as “sankan shion,” which referred to alternating periods of cold and warm days. It was commonly said to be a sign that spring was near.

When I thought about that, about these days which were warm, then cold, then warm, then cold, it almost made me picture spring as a hesitant, timid child who was walking nervously towards us. It was a fun image to have in my head.

We soon found ourselves going into March, which was the prime time for viewing the nearby plum blossoms.

It would be rather out of character for me to be into something as girly as flower watching, but I must admit that, no matter how out of character it was, sitting on Yukari’s porch and watching the plum blossoms dance in a distant mist of pink filled me with a sense of peace.

It was nighttime.

The air was damp with moisture and the sky was moonless.

“Ah, Gaku-chan. Here you are.”

Yukari walked up behind me and sat herself down next to me.



"Yeah... the flowers are really pretty at night, aren't they? They're like little lights in the distance."

I had watched the flowers at noon, in the evening, and now when the sun had set, but I had to admit that the scene was the most breathtaking at night.

"... Yes, but you know they light up the plum trees over there at night, right?"

"..... Ah..... I see. So, where's Tenjou and Alice?"

"At the back. Kasoku-kun came to deliver some sake, and they're teasing him now. Why do you think Ten-chan likes teasing Kasoku-kun so much? Even Alice-chan is starting to join in... Kasoku-kun is a really really good person, you know? He's really kind, and dependable..."

"..... Come on, I'm sure Kasoku can handle himself. I mean, he has that amazing drill, right?"

"Uuu... And it's not like Gaku-chan ever tries to help Kasoku-kun out at all either. Maybe I shouldn't have told you about his drill? Maybe everyone is just jealous of his drill? Well, it really is romantic and super cool though..."

"Yeah, maybe. Don't worry, I'll be sure to let Tenjou and Alice know everything you said later."

"... Wha?"

In the end, Yukari never transferred away.

After spring, we would all go into our third year of junior high together.

Right now, my biggest worry was whether or not Yukari and I would get placed in the same class again for the new school year.

I had vague, fuzzy memories of being put in the same class as Yukari in the other worlds (by the way, I had Yukari seal the call function on my left hand, and because of that my "dream" really just seemed like a dream now... I also considered asking Yukari to remove the cell phone from my hand entirely, but I ended up not making that request.



This left hand was a connection between Yukari and all those other me's, after all), but that didn't mean I could just let my guard down.

After all, there was now an irregularity in this world.

"But isn't it great?! Alice-chan is going to be a third-year with us!"

"Yeah."

Alice had decided to continue her study abroad with us even into spring.

Originally, she had planned to return to Jaunt right after the second school year ended, but she clearly had some kind of change of heart and ended up extending her stay in Japan.

Yukari was really happy when Alice told her about this, and I... well, I admit I was glad as well.

Alice still called me a commoner and was still in the midst of inspecting the goods and figuring out whether I was worthy of being her true friend (I think things were going pretty well between us though).

Also, maybe it was because they both had similar personality types (i.e. people who just can't properly express their true feelings), but Alice and Nanami seemed to hit it off pretty well with each other. And now, through that relationship, Nanami was also slowly getting used to having a normal relationship with Yukari again. Of course, Yukari was also ecstatic about that.

Spring would be here soon.

It would be the first season I would be ringing in together with not only Yukari, but with Nanami and Alice as well.

I had a feeling that this upcoming year would be even more exciting than the last.

Ah, and wouldn't it be nice if we could all experience that year from within the same classroom...



In the distance, the lit up plum blossoms floated in the night air, making me feel as if I was being treated to an ethereal glimpse into the Garden of Eden. I was captivated.

Suddenly, I felt Yukari's gaze on me.

"..... What's up?"

"..... Ah, it's nothing."

Yukari shook her head and her gaze fell to all the plastic models that decorated various places around her porch. She took one of the models into her hands.

Following her actions, I also found myself looking at that plastic model.

Now that I think about it, back during that incident all these plastic models had been moving, right?

I vaguely remember them protecting Yukari and fighting for her, and acting like they were worried about me... I had asked Yukari about it before, but she just told me it must've been my imagination. Still, I'm pretty sure I hadn't just been seeing things back then...

"... Hey, Gaku-chan."

"Hm?"

Yukari didn't look at me, keeping her eyes on the robot in her hands.

"..... Thanks, Gaku-chan."

"..... Umm, for what?"

"Just... for lots of things..."

After she said that, Yukari smiled.

And planted a soft kiss on the robot she was holding in her hands.



And seeing that... for some reason, I suddenly felt blood rush to my cheeks.



This story was originally a short story I had planned for publication in the November special edition of the Dengeki Bunko Magazine.

It was going to be a collaboration with the manga artist Tsunashima Shirou-shi, and my editor gave me “robots and girls” as a theme, so I... well, I exhausted every effort to make this story. If you’re reading this afterword after having finished the story, then I’m sure you’d agree with me that there was nothing but “robots” and “girls” in this work (at least, from one point of view). I really did work very hard on this... well, not that I’m trying to make a big deal out of that, but I will say that I have a strange emotional attachment to this work, and when I was writing my short story I remember really wanting to publish this work as its own separate book.

And so, here we are.

Moreover, Tsunashima-shi ended up sticking with me after our work for the magazine and illustrated the novel for me.

At any rate, this was a manga artist who had to keep up with his own series, so I honestly was prepared to not have any insert illustrations at all, but when I unwrapped the bow on this gift I saw that not only had Tsunashima-shi drawn both title illustrations for each arc and insert illustrations, but had even drawn bonus illustrations. I’m thankful to have been able to work with someone who, although he designed a lot of things for me based on the aforementioned themes of “robots and girls,” still could come up to me afterwards and honestly ask me to not use any of the robot designs in the actual book (given the setup

around our protagonist, showing those designs might come off as a bit weird, after all. But I'll still probably include those robot designs as a bonus at the end. Maybe. I think.)

Honestly, I feel I'll end up being happier with this work than the readers will be.

Much thanks to everyone for giving me this opportunity.

-

The contents of this work are presented in three story arcs:

Various Notes on Marii (this arc was the one originally published in Dengeki Magazine and had been titled *Purple the Qualia* back then)

1/1,000,000,000th of a Kiss

If

-

... To be honest, there were moments when I thought that having two stories plus an epilogue was a bit too little for a book, but when I saw the title illustrations that Tsunashima-shi had prepared for each arc, I once again regained my convictions. *Yes, putting in more stories would just be too much... just these three are plenty*, I convinced myself. Of course... if you read the book, then you might come to agree with me as well, but there really was a gaping, inescapable difference between reading something and seeing it for yourself. When I read other works too, I always find myself feeling jealousy towards the persuasive power of illustrations, since with them it only takes a single glance to get the desired effect (I'm not saying that words didn't have their own kind of power, but I digress...)

Whenever we look at anything, we definitely take in *something* more than just the pure fact that we "see" something.

But, we just don't realize it.

To be precise, we can't be conscious of this *something* because we don't need to be. Conversely, we "see" things like we do precisely because things need to be "seen."



This work is a theatrical production drawn from that *something*.

-

And so, I present to you this slightly (?) strange (?) story that came to fruition by accident from a work I had produced for industry.

Qualia the Purple.

A work that was brought to you today by plenty of lucky meetings and chances.

To those who have already finished reading, and to my future readers:

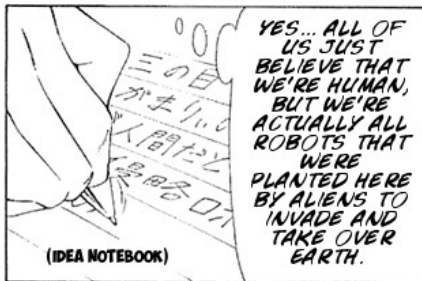
I hope you enjoy yourself.

- Ueo Hisamitsu, signing off.

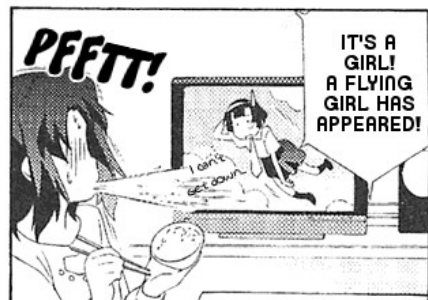
Bonus 4-Koma Manga

Artist: Tsunashima Shirou

TENJOU NOTE



GAKU-CHAN'S FLIGHT MODE





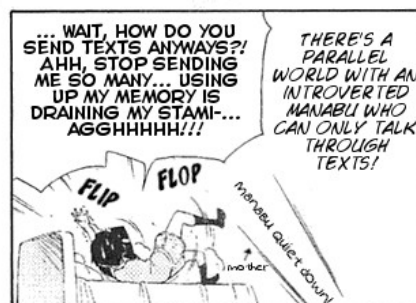
Wow! Qualia the novel!

Bonus materials 1

YUKARI AND ALICE FROM BEHIND

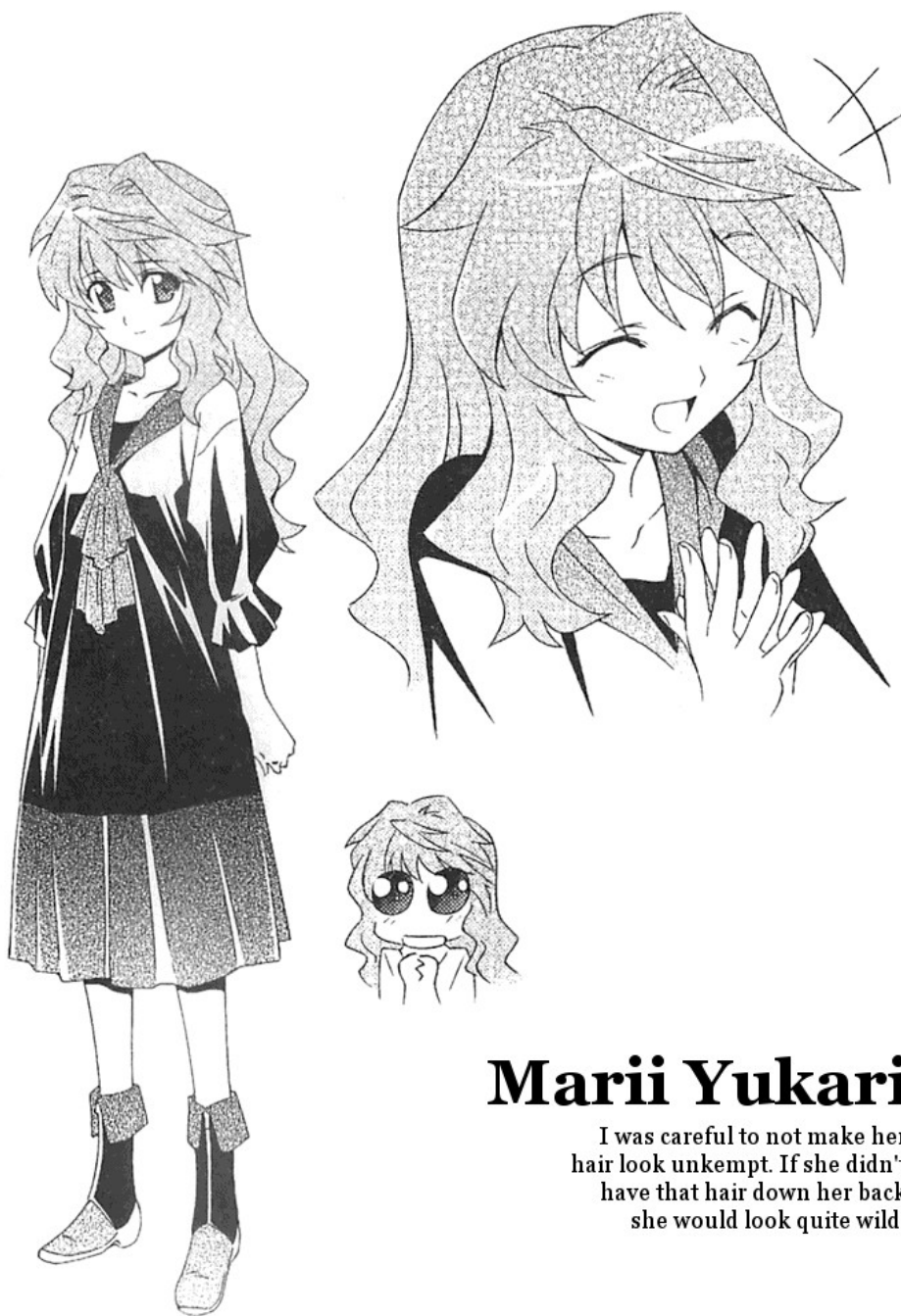


LEFT HAND CELL PHONE



Character Concept Artwork

Illustrator and Commentary: Tsunashima Shirou

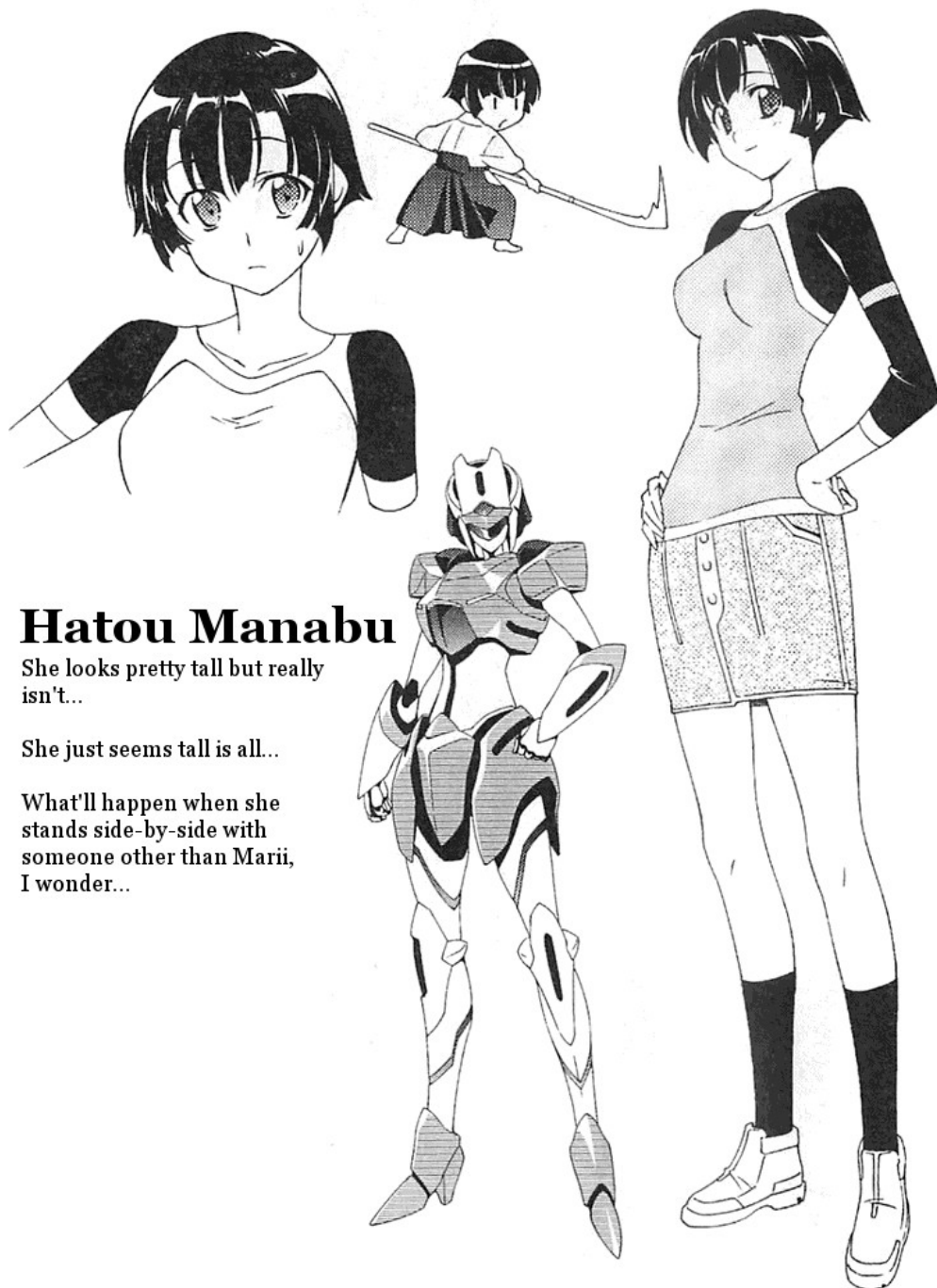


Marii Yukari

I was careful to not make her hair look unkempt. If she didn't have that hair down her back she would look quite wild.



Bonus Materials 2



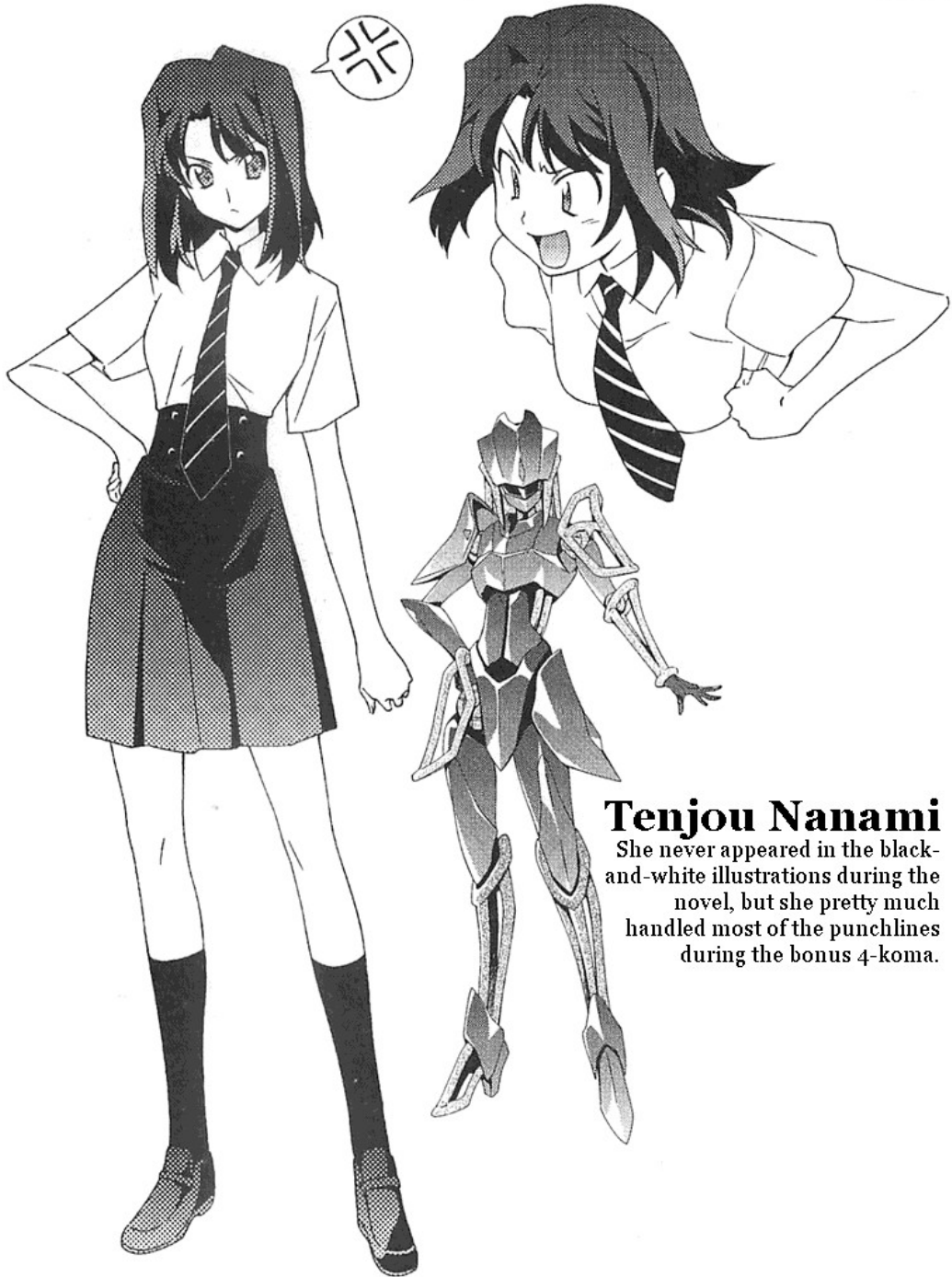
Hatou Manabu

She looks pretty tall but really isn't...

She just seems tall is all...

What'll happen when she stands side-by-side with someone other than Marii, I wonder...

Character Concept Artwork



Tenjou Nanami

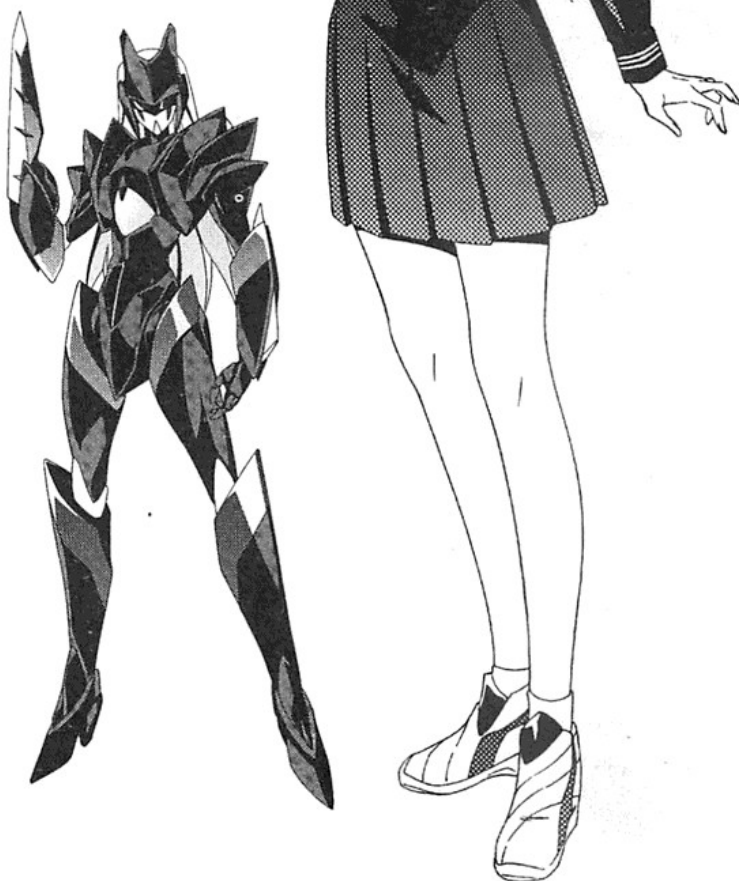
She never appeared in the black-and-white illustrations during the novel, but she pretty much handled most of the punchlines during the bonus 4-koma.



Killing Demon (?)

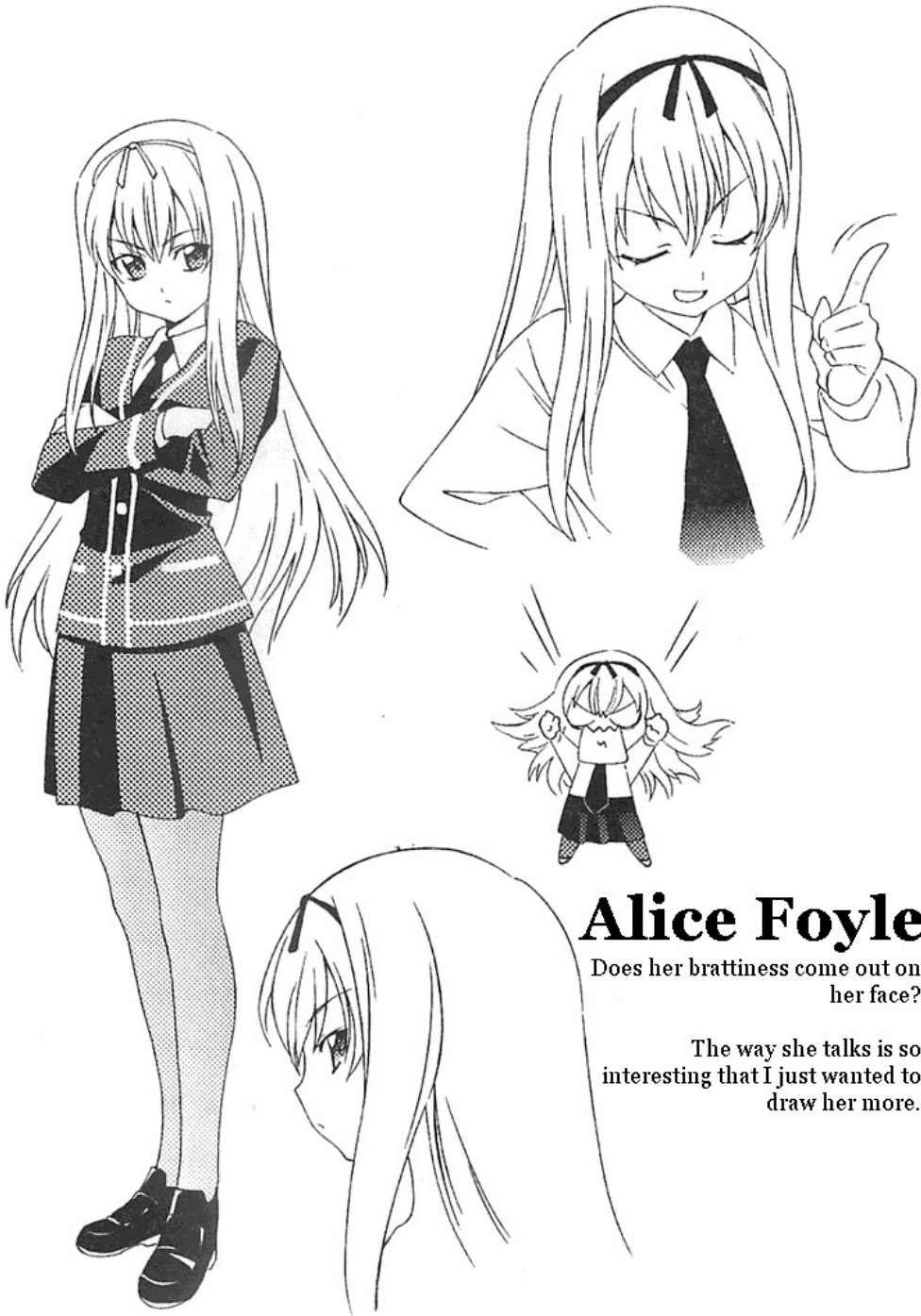
During initial phases I had her wearing a jersey instead.

But now that she's in a sailor's outfit I think she seems a lot more ominous...





Character Concept Artwork



Alice Foyle

Does her brattiness come out on her face?

The way she talks is so interesting that I just wanted to draw her more.



Afterword

Marii sees people as robots...

But even if it wasn't robots,
Exactly how do people see each other?
It's not something anybody can really say
for sure.

Even when looking into mirrors or at
photographs, we have to rely on our own
knowledge.
And common sense is just something that
people think about after the fact.

From now on, when I look someone in the
eyes... I feel I'll be a bit frightened.
But also be filled with anticipation.

... That's what this work is about.

I hope this book can reach as many people
as possible...
Ah. That screw is mine!

Ueo Hisamitsu.

